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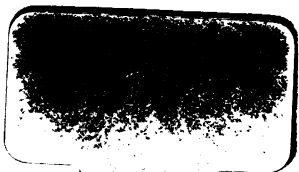
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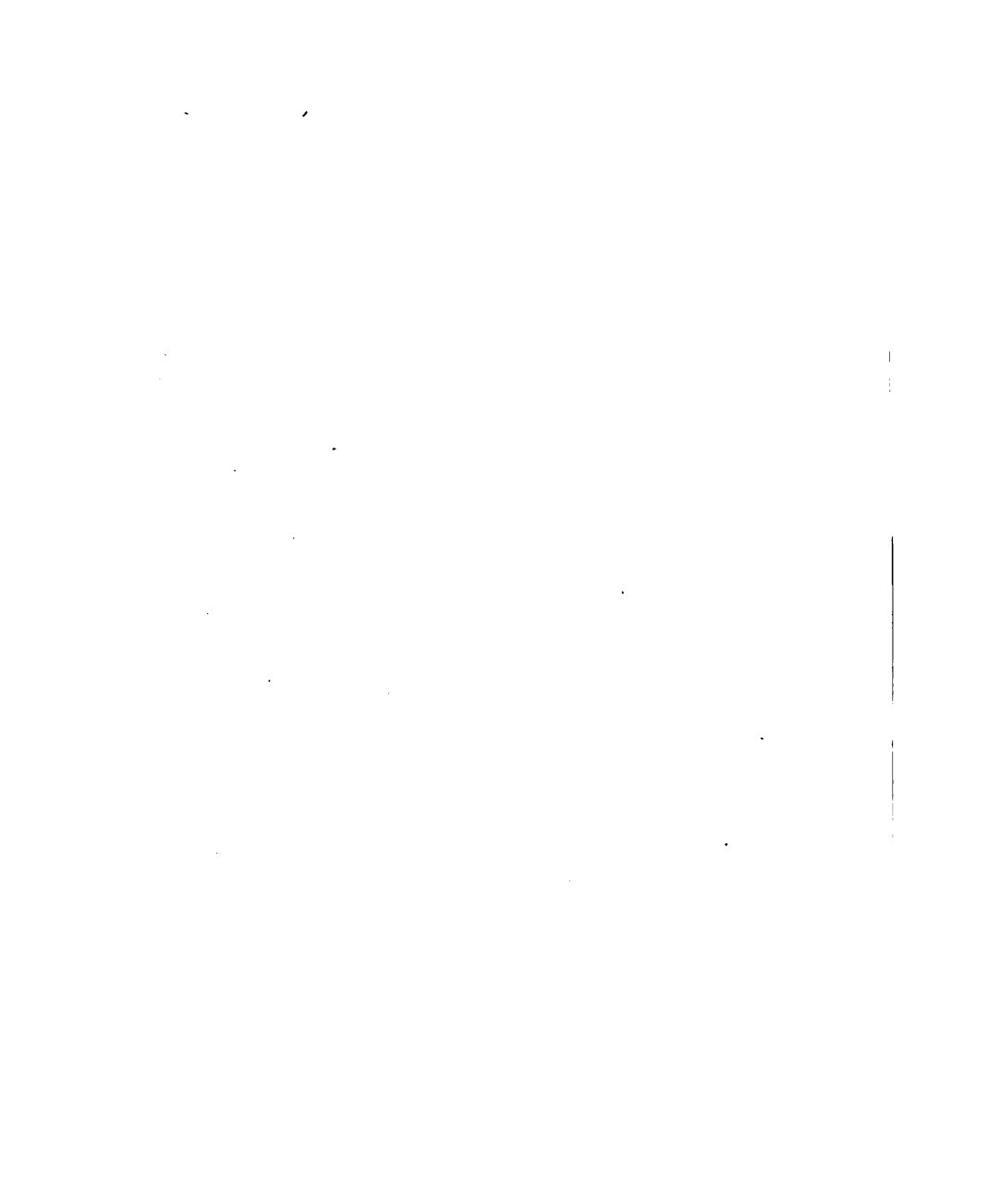
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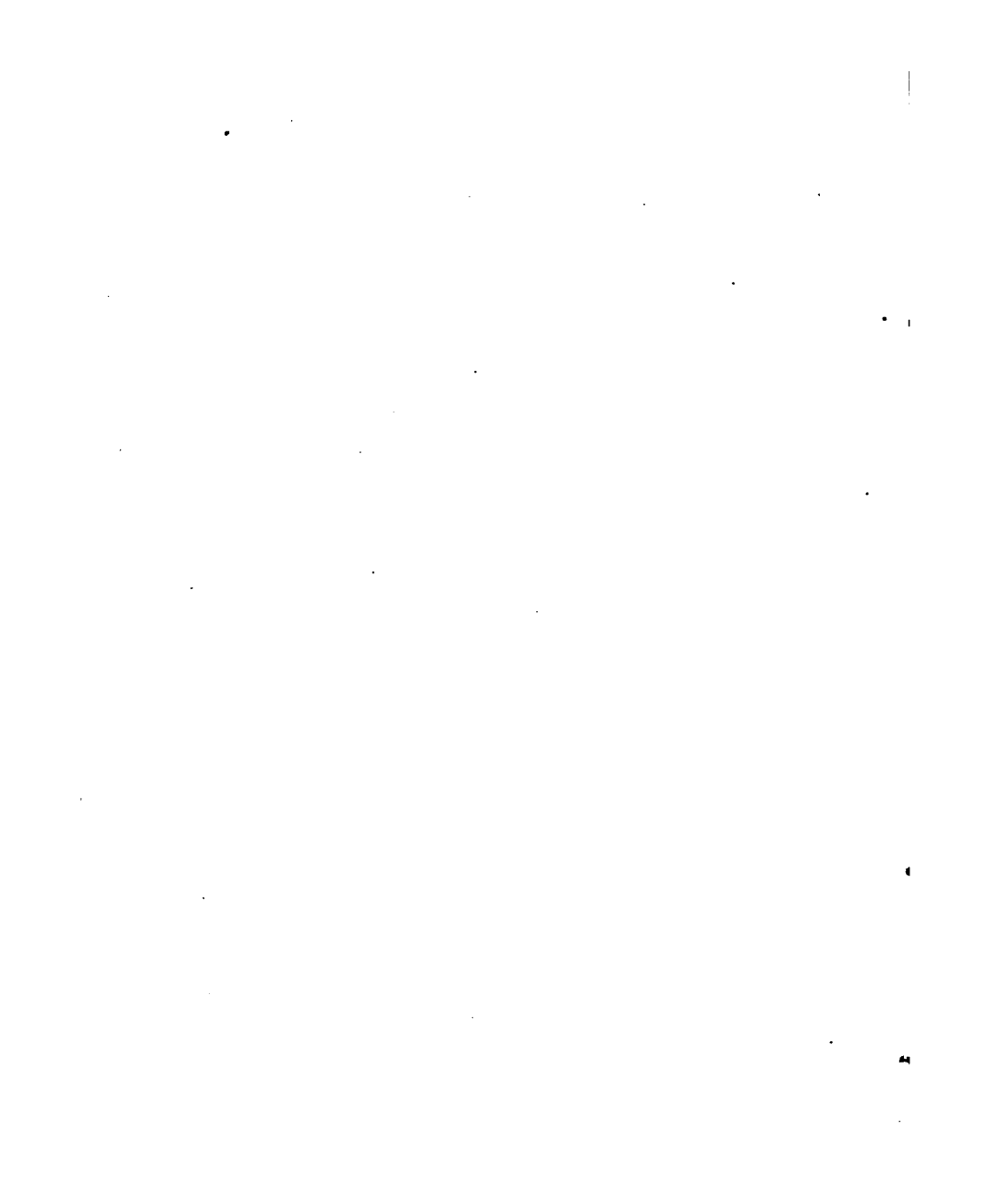






THE

FROST UPON THE PANE.









The Wanderer on the Grave-stone.



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# THE POST FROM THE FLAME A CHRISTMAS STORY



LONDON, W. & F. G. CASH.



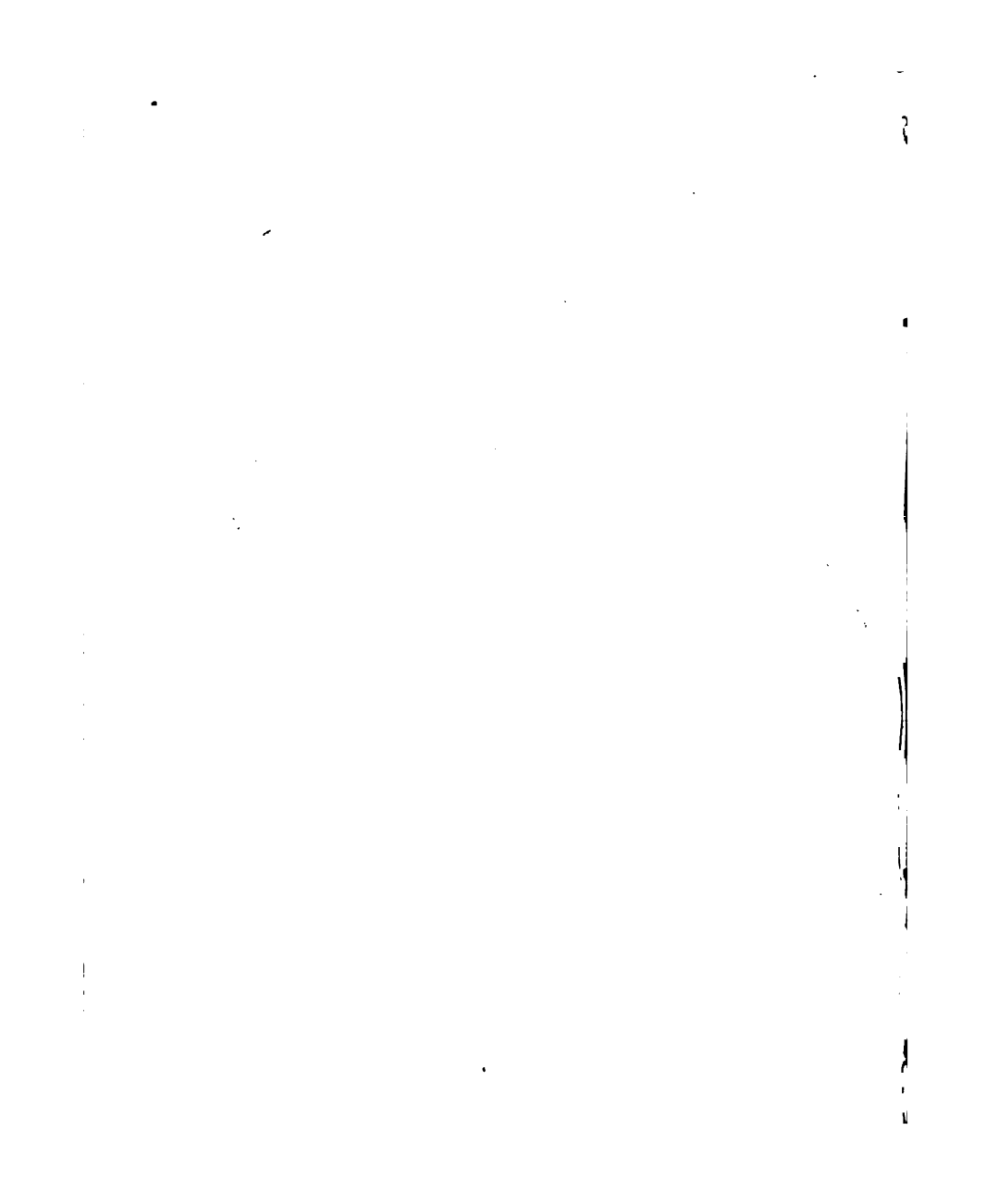
THE  
FROST  
UPON THE

PLANE

A  
CHRISTMAS  
STORY



LONDON, W. & F. G. CASH.



THE  
FROST UPON THE PANE.

*A Christmas Story.*

---

EDITED BY W. B. RANDS.

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Some natural sorrow, grief or pain,  
That has been, and may be again.

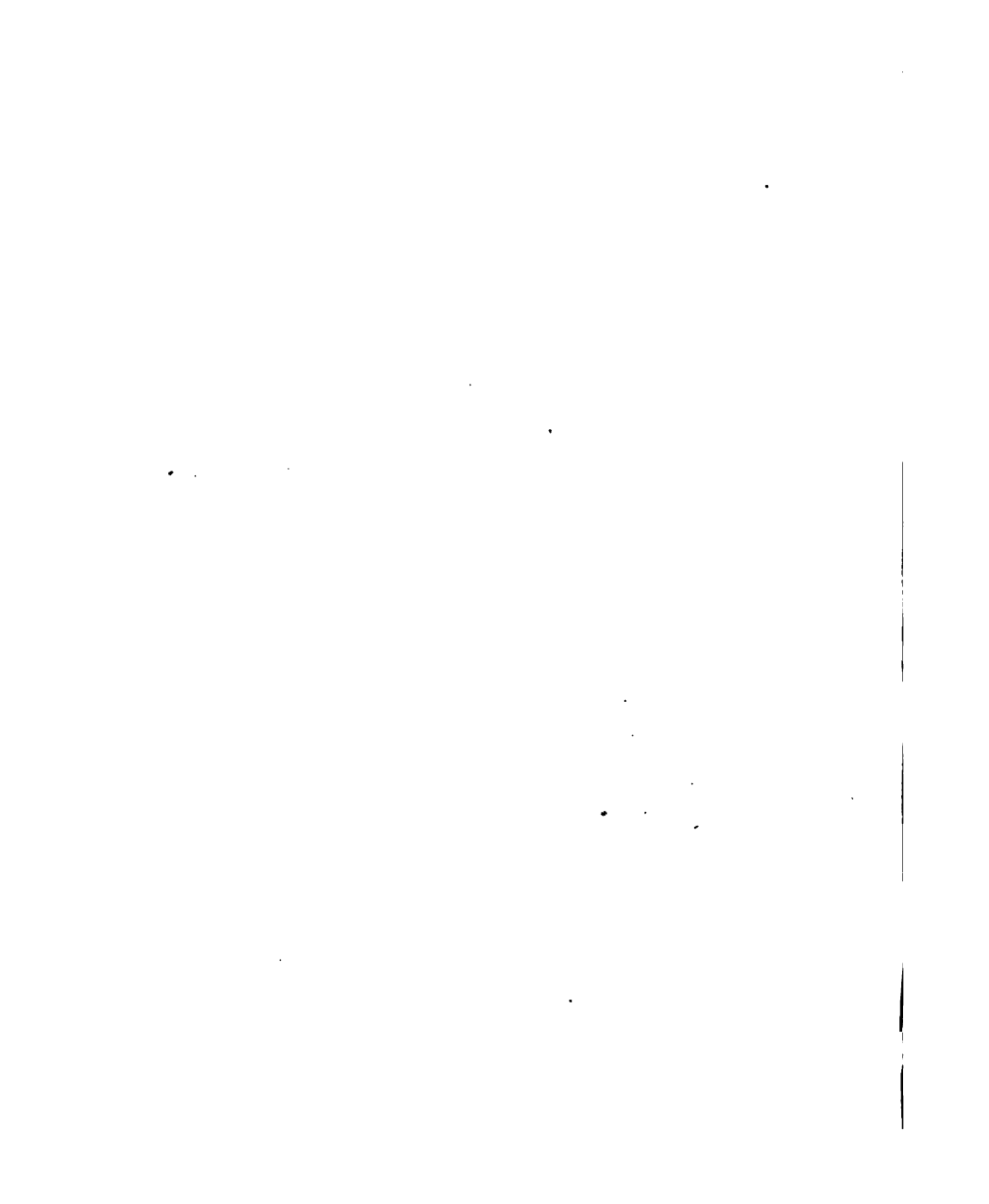
LONDON:  
W & F. G. CASH, 5, BISHOPSGATE STREET WITHOUT.

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1854.

249. C. 476.





## THE EDITOR TO THE READER.

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“HERE,” you say, “is a Christmas story, told by John Tompkins. Who *is* Tompkins?”

The name of Tompkins, though not familiar to the general reader, is perfectly so to the general postman (of the Clapham district). My knowledge of him dates from the middle of November last, when a common acquaintance brought me a *rudis indigestaque moles* of MS. in the Tompkins hieroglyph, from which I have evolved the following pages. I thought with my friend that the “Frost upon the Pane” was essentially a Christmas story: it is a tale of the affections; it is free from phrase-spinning; it is short enough to be read aloud in an evening, without

being considered tedious; it has not the symmetry and working up of incident which go far to stamp a tale for untrue; and it is pervaded, not only by a religious spirit, in the ordinary sense of the expression, but by a reverence for that indirect revelation of the Great Spontaneous Goodness which we get in women and children.

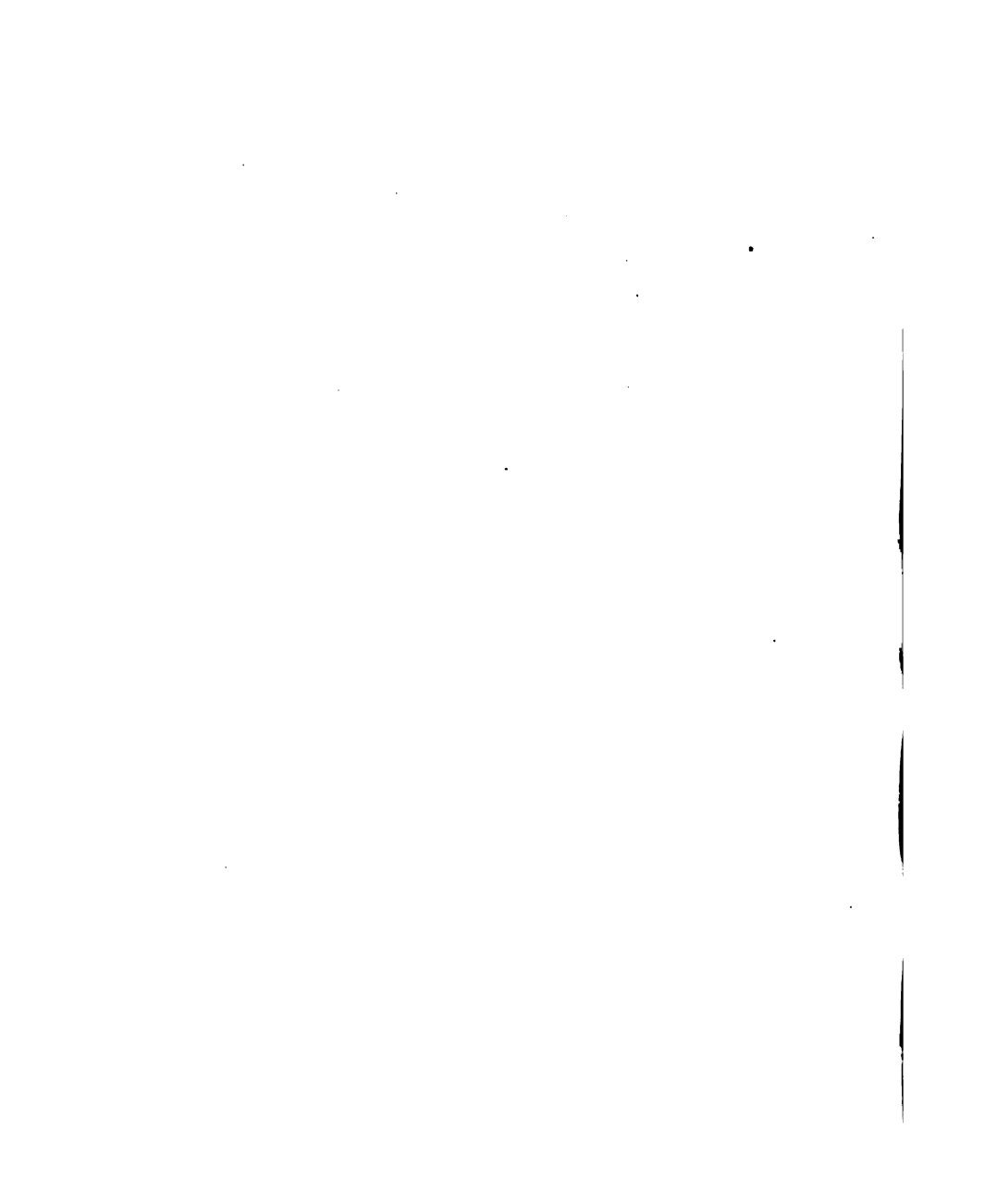
I believe Mr. Tompkins has another bundle of MS. relative to poor Desard, the artist, whose character and history are both singular, and that I am hereafter to see it.

W. B. R.

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# THE FROST UPON THE PANE.

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## THE PROLOGUE.

THIRTY-SEVEN next birth-day. It would be impossible to keep out of the old bachelor's list much longer, unless I took vigorous measures. But how should I grind myself young again? How?

I found it difficult to keep to the question with the tenacity requisite for obtaining a satisfactory solution. So I took a sheet of paper, and wrote out in large-hand—

“JOHN TOMPKINS’ *ÆTATIS SUÆ XXXVII*: PROB. To grind himself young again.”

Thus entreating my own attention to the subject, I arrived, after some cogitation, at two conclusions: I. That the Rosicrucian elixir was out of my reach, and might not be to my taste perhaps, if I could get it. (I never take medicaments in a liquid form—a

draught is my abomination.) II. That the popular and penny treatise, "How to live a hundred years !!!" would not meet my views. My object being, not to spin out my existence from its present stand-point, but to reverse the shadow on the dial and rejuvenate myself.

My housekeeper, who is a good elderly soul, tapped at the door to ask something about dinner, but observed, on entering, that I looked pale, and said she hoped I was not ill?

"Not at all Mrs. Peppermint," said I, "not at all. I am anxiously considering a question, and a home question."

"A home question, Sir? I have a beautiful little tract with that title, Sir."

"O, this is a medical question, you see, Mrs. Peppermint!"

"Then, Sir, let me recommend Buchan's Domestic Medicine, if it's a home question and a medical question."

And Mrs. Peppermint fetched me her Buchan, and pointed out to me a fine electuary which was good for anything, in the Appendix. I thanked her, and, being a systematic man, began at the beginning of the book, which was fortunate.

For after the "Advertisement" comes—as you know, if you have read Buchan—a "Memoir of the author ;" and, fortunately, I read this memoir. And there I learned that Dr. Buchan had a prejudice in favour of the society of the young, as a sanitary expedient of the restorative (or rejuvenating) order. This fell in with my own notions ; for if I have a weakness it is for little children, and especially for little girls.

My course was clear. I wrote at the foot of the question,—

"JOHN TOMPKINS, get up a juvenile party to grind yourself young again. Q. E. D."

I felt a sensation of cheery juvenility creeping over me, as I jotted down the solution of my problem, and rang impetuously for Mrs. Peppermint.

"I've found it out, Mrs. Peppermint, I'm going to take it directly," said I.

"Why, you look a deal better a'ready, Sir, that you do! Will you have it in black currant jam, or red currant jelly, or marsh-mallow paste, Sir?"

"I'll have it," said I, "in the front drawing-room."

"O! . . . ." (looking bewildered) "but how shall I mix it, Sir?"



"Boys and girls," said I; "rather more girls than boys."

I did not allow the poor soul to remain long under the impression that I had lost my senses over Buchan, and finally I consulted my niece Rosy, and she arranged a juvenile party for me early in December, which went off so well, that we resolved on a grander affair about Christmas time. I enjoyed it very much, and kept the little things up to a very unseasonable hour. I felt five years younger next day, and thought Buchan a sensible prescriber.

Towards dark, before the candles were brought, one of the little things proposed to tell stories. Of course there was a brisk agitation of the question, What should the stories be about? One sweet girl said, "Tell stories about the frost on the pane!" But the idea did not seem to be caught up, and the story-telling went on in the ordinary juvenile fashion :

"There was once a giant, who lived in a great castle up on a high rock; and the giant had three heads, and seven arms, and four legs. And there was an eagle, and a griffin, and a tiger, and a bear, to keep watch at the gate of the castle by night and by day—"

Or,

"There was once a beautiful fairy, who lived in a pretty palace, with ten millions of windows, all painted glass. There was a garden in front ever so much bigger than Kensington Gardens, and, oh, so pretty! And a young prince who was in love with this fairy—"

Or, a very little tiddy thing, who had been waiting for her "turn," with impatience in her sparkling eyes, overwhelmed us all with a naïve story, beginning:

"There was once a little girl who had often been told by her papa and mamma not to go near a wood where there was a lion, that roared as loud—oh, louder than thunder!—but one morning—"

Or, a young gentleman, approaching the hobble-dehoy stage, who had actually dipped into Ainsworth and James, blushed very red as he plunged into an ambitious attempt, beginning:

"The shades of evening were fast stealing o'er the scene, when a horseman, whose manly form was enveloped in a large cloak, was seen urging his frantic way up the steep which led to the castle of the haughty Baron de Alphonso. The distant convent bell," &c. &c.

This commencement of course provoking mysterious nods, and exclamations of surprise and approval, from the elder young ladies of the party, as much as to say, "That's the right article!"

But when the servants could be kept waiting no longer, and the happy circle were given in charge to the escorts who had been sent to see them home,—as Rosy and I sat for a quiet half-hour by the fire, before we, too, could make up our minds to move,—it crossed my mind that telling stories "about the frost on the pane" was not such a bad idea. A frosted pane is a mirror of wonderful things. What does the verse say?

"He went to the windows of those who slept"—

That was Jack Frost, of course—

"He went to the windows of those who slept,  
And over each pane like a fairy crept ;  
Wherever he breathed, wherever he stept,  
By the light of the moon were seen  
Most beautiful things—there were flowers and trees,  
There were bevvies of birds and swarms of bees,  
There were cities, thrones, temples, and towns, and these  
All pictured in silver sheen."

"Rosy," said I, when she came down ready to take my arm and go, all smiles and furs, bless her ! "Rosy,

don't you think we could get a story out of the frost on the pane, a story for our grand grown-up Christmas party? You see wonderful things in the fire, and in the clouds, and in the frost too!"

And my dear little Rosy thought the thing was to be done, and insisted that I should do it, and stood on tip-toe to kiss me, and settled the preliminary stages of the process.

"Charles and I"—

"You puss, must Charles have a hand in it?"

"If you please, uncle!" (with a mocking curtsy)

"Charles and I will write down what we see in the frost on the pane to-morrow morning, and get his sisters and their beaus, you know, to do the same the next morning, and tell you in a letter, and you must pick out what you like, you know, and make it up into a story!"

So said, so done. And it so happened that, after selecting some of the things seen in the frost, I found they squared very well with a true tale, some of the actors in which were known to me. I told my story then, true in its essential parts, over our Christmas fire, and here it is, very nearly as I told it; the objects seen in the frost on the pane heading the chapters, the structure of which they suggested.

I may mention that I was rather surprised when Rosy spoke of Charles's sisters and their "beaus;" my impression having always been that the elder of the two ladies was without a wooer, although she was twenty-seven years old. She was a very shy and retiring person, and it was in an incidental conversation with her about my Christmas story that I first gained anything like an insight into her character.

## I.

### THE WIDOW'S CAP.

A widow's cap is a very common thing, and not at all romantic, though it might be saddening, if it were not grotesque,—some say, ugly. But then, we know that there is not always sorrow where there is white crape, even were the widow's cap ever so picturesque. For my part, I do not like the look of it.

There was nothing particular about the widow's cap of Widow Clinton, and it was not even made of crape, but of white muslin. The crape cap which she had worn for a twelvemonth after Mr. Clinton's death was carefully laid by, and only worn once a year, on the anniversary of that event.

Also, there was nothing particular about Widow Clinton. I do not suppose you would have noticed her if you had passed her in the street. She was pale; but so are other widows; not all, but such as are, in the words of Holy Writ, "widows indeed." She was thin; and so are others beside widows,—married women, and maids. To speak the truth,

there was a look of gentle sadness in her face which was not altogether so common as her cap, but it was nothing extraordinary. It is also possible that to a delicate ear there might have been something in her voice which said that the widow and sorrow had long been mated. Whether you would have detected any characteristic in her walk, or her manners, or in her style of address, which suggested better days, is quite uncertain. There is a good deal of fancy in such matters, and the Widow Clinton was really *not* a remarkable person.

Neither was her little shop-window remarkable. The shop was a small one in what we call "the general line," and had a small bow-window. It contained sweet-stuffs, cakes, particularly "eights," whips, tops, hoops, primers, story-books, fruit, balls, shuttlecocks and battledores, and mock-guns and pistols. There was a row of jars on a shelf containing tobaccos and snuffs, and there were also a few dolls, tied up together, and hanging to a nail by a string.

There was nothing particular about the little village in which Mrs. Clinton's shop was situated. It was very much like other villages, a good deal infested with scandal, generally quiet, but liable to

occasional fits of fierce excitement about trifles which provoked the derision of the town-bred and the travelled. The Clergyman was very much looked up to; the Doctor was second only to the Clergyman; the barber's shop was the point to which all latest intelligences converged. On a fine evening, the people gathered at their doors in knots, to chat about anything or nothing, when if the Doctor or the Parson came down the street, there was much bowing and curtseying.

But the evening on which my story begins was not a fine one; at least, it was not an evening for gossiping at street doors; no, not even in gutta-percha soles, if gutta-percha had been then discovered, which it had not been. It is difficult to say what is *not* fine Christmas weather, supposing it is cold and not sloppy; but surely snow on a Christmas Eve is not objectionable, except to railway-trains and people who have long walks before them. And on this Christmas Eve it was snowing fast. There was snow on the house-tops, and snow on the trees, and snow on the hills in the distance, and snow on the church, and snow at all the doorways. The village had but one street, and that was a long avenue of



snow, white and crisp, indented here and there with footsteps.

The snow lay deep at Mrs. Clinton's shop-door, and on the window frames, until it was shovelled from one and brushed from the other by one of the great boys of the village school, who, in his boyish way, patronised the Widow, and thought himself in his real good-nature, and his assumed dignity, a very fine fellow.

"*There!* Mrs. Clinton," said he, when he had done, "I think it'll do now, won't it?"

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Chuckers," said the Widow, enunciating the *Mr.* very clearly, "will you take a few Christmas candles for your sister? Here are green, red, and white—pick and choose."

Just as Bob Chuckers left the shop, it was entered by the old man who performed the double duties of church clerk and sexton for the village.

"A merry Christmas to you, and many of 'em, Widow," said the visitor.

"Thank you, Mr. Dobbs: I'm sure I wish you the same."

"Amen! and may the Lord have mercy upon us all!" said Dobbs. He was in the habit of inter-

larding his discourse with "Amens!" and other ejaculations, culled from the Prayer Book.

"Its the dreadfulest snowiest night I remember for this seven year, come New Year's Day, by the token of which my good woman remembered me we lost our last baby that very night. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.' Amen!"

A keen observer might have seen a slight shudder pass over the Widow's frame, but good old Dobbs was *not* a keen observer, and he continued—

"As I often say to her, we ought to be very humbly thankful when we know our child is safe and happy with the Almighty, Mrs. Clinton, and we can't tell what he might have had to go through if he had lived. And a Christmas Eve, by the token of which our Saviour was to be born the next day (Amen!), is not the time for repining, hey, goody?"

"No, surely," said Widow Clinton, busying herself with the lamp in the window, which, however, did not appear to stand in particular need of trimming, "No, surely, we ought all to be very thankful to the Almighty for his goodness."

"As the Prayer Book says, I think of 'all that travel by land or by water' to-night, goody. It must be blowing great guns out at sea, for the wind's

mortal strong and keen here ; and the coaches, heaven keep 'em—I mean, keep the passengers”—

“And the guards and drivers,” suggested the Barber, who had just stepped into the shop.

“For a good many of 'em will get locked in snow-drifts, I'm afeard,” continued Dobbs, with a nod of recognition at the Barber. The Barber and the Clerk were supposed to be rivals in scholarship, and in general and political information, and there subsisted between them as deadly an enmity as could reasonably exist between Christians of the same parish.

\* The Clerk, Dobbs, was a stubborn Tory and high-churchman ; the Barber, Waters, was at the head of a radical faction in the village, had strong dissenting leanings, and was even called revolutionary, by some timid and apprehensive persons. “The Weekly Dispatch” was occasionally sent to him by a friend in London, and was ostentatiously paraded in his shop as an evidence of important political connections. On the other hand, Dobbs had a relative in town who “held a situation,” it was mysteriously said, “under Government,” and he was supposed to furnish Dobbs from time to time with exclusive information concerning the state of parties, the designs of ministers, the balance of power in Europe, and so

on. The adherents of Waters insisted indeed that the Government appointment was only an under-messenger's post at the House of Commons, and that the messenger knew as much about political affairs as any of the women who swept the passages of the Parliament-house; but that view of the case was not universally popular, and, on the whole, Dobbs had been in the ascendant in a political and literary point of view until lately. Within the last few months, his literary pretensions had been rather shattered, notwithstanding the presumption in his favour from official position. It appeared that Waters had composed a patriotic "copy of verses," and sent them to the county newspaper, heading them with the quotation—"Who would be free themselves must strike the blow!" and they had actually been inserted in the Poet's Corner! The excitement in the village was unprecedented, when it found itself in possession of a Milton, neither mute nor inglorious. The flow of custom to the Barber's shop was ceaseless and overpowering for several days. Numbers belonging to the Tory party paid to have their hair cut, merely to gain a glimpse of the immortal verses, and Waters triumphed. The Radical faction were merciless in their victorious self-gratulations, and taunted the

other body with lack of genius, saying, "Show us a poet like Waters!" Thus challenged, and spurred on by a fatal ambition, Dobbs at last composed some verses likewise, to the tune of "Church and King for ever," and sent them to the county newspaper, with his name at full length. The next number of "The Crusher and Midland Counties Journal of Reform" contained the following, under the head of "Notices to Correspondents:"

"W. DOBBS—*We cannot insert your balderdash.*"

I draw a veil over the mortification of Dobbs and the Tory party in the village, and pass on to the period when, after the affair had a little blew over, Dobbs had succeeded in partially retrieving his lost reputation by composing an epitaph for a defunct tradesman in the place, which was actually inscribed upon his tombstone. It was a little after this period that my story opens, and I now go back to the scene in the Widow's little shop.

"Widow," said Waters, "I think I'll take a pound o' Christmas candles for my young 'uns."

"Yes, Mr. Waters."

"And give me a pound and a half, neighbour, will you?" said Dobbs, laying much stress on the half pound.

"Thank you, Mr. Dobbs; in a minute."

"I think," resumed Waters, "on second consideration, I'll take *two* pound, Widow."

"Mixed colours, red, green, and white, Mr. Waters?"

"Yes, mixed colours, in course."

"Perhaps, Mr. Dobbs," said Mrs. Clinton, "perhaps *you'd* like to take two pounds?" This was said with the faintest possible twinkle in the eye, and the slightest tinge of the sarcastic in the tone of voice.

"Well, goody, I think I will; only let 'em be all *white*—it's so much more genteel; none of your gaudy, showy, vulgar colours for *me*. I hate anything low-minded."

"These is hard times for the poor, Mrs. Clinton, with bread and coals at such a price," said Waters.

"Heaven help them!" said the Widow.

"Amen!" replied the Barber, with a latent mimicry in his tone and manner; "and may we all live to see the poor man get a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and the pension-list cut down."

"I wish," began Dobbs, with withering bitterness, "all people whatsoever would larn the lesson set 'em in our Catechism, to do their duty in that station to which it shall please God Almighty to

call 'em, and not speak great swelling words against dignities, by the token of which, accordin' to the blessed apostles, we was to know the last days was coming, and that evil spirits was abroad in the earth, from which may the Almighty defend us, and ever give us cause to say with heart and voice, God save the king. Amen !"

"God save the people !" said the Barber, throwing up his cap.

"God save us all !" said another voice from behind,—a voice which was evidently that of a person of superior culture. Turning round, the rival powers, who had thus been talking *at* each other, without once meeting each other's eye, saw the kind old Clergyman of the village, and both blushed a little.

"Peace and goodwill amongst men !" said the Clergyman ; "a happy Christmas to us all !"

"Amen !" said Dobbs, below his breath, while the Barber backed out of the shop, with the Sexton's parcel of candles in his hand. A more satisfactory blunder never was made, and neither party ever complained or mentioned the subject. Barber was delighted to have walked off with Sexton's tallowy gentility, and Sexton was really glad to have got the

gay colours for the children, though he had pretended to despise them as vulgar.

"I shall be round at your house almost as soon as you are, Dobbs," said the Clergyman. And the Sexton touched his hat, and left the place, with a kindly good-night to the Widow, and his bunch of keys jingling in his hand. Dobbs always made his keys jingle; there was something official about it. Waters had *no* keys to jingle: it was a clear point of superiority.

"Well, Mrs. Clinton," said the Clergyman, benignantly,—“this is a bitter Christmas season; but I do not doubt you find the Lord is as good as ever to you?”

"Sir," said the Widow, "I have much to be thankful for, now, as at all times." But, as she spoke, tears came upon her cheeks which were fuller of sorrow than of gratitude; so it seemed to the Clergyman.

"Absent from the body, present with the Lord,"—said the Clergyman, with gentle emphasis.

"I know the dead is with God, Sir; but my chiefest sorrow was before you came to the village; and if it were not for the Everlasting Arms beneath



me——” She was interrupted by a flood of choking tears.

“I know, I know full well, my friend, and I often suffer with you, in spirit. But God is everywhere, and no secret thing is hidden from Him, who is a Father to the fatherless, and a present help to all who call upon his name.”

A curly-headed little boy, of apparently about five years of age, rushed joyously into the shop, and broke out:—

“If you pease, Mittess Kinton, I’m to have a whole pennuf of Kistmas candles, all torts of colours, if you pease.”

The Widow hurriedly handed the little fellow a magnificent, overflowing pennyworth; he uttered a delighted “Oh!” and quitted the place, even quicker than he came.

When the Clergyman left and shook hands with Widow Clinton, there was something yellow and glittering in her palm, for which she did not seem prepared. But the man of God was gone before she could see clearly what it might be; for her eyes were brimming over, and the solitary lamp in the little shop was a confused flicker of light at a distance.

## II.

### THE WAGGON AND HORSES.

TINKLE, tinkle, went the little bells as the waggon came up the road that led to the village. As soon as you got to the windmill by the parsonage-house, you could see the lights in the street, and Old Huxford, the waggoner, was glad to see the lights of the village that Christmas Eve. Not merely because it was cold and snowing fast, and the parlour of the inn was warm, but because there were kindly suggestions in whatever spoke of life and human habitations, and even the hearts of waggoners expand on a Christmas eve. It is even possible that waggoners become imaginative, on occasion, and I can make excuses for Old Huxford, if he found something spectral in the snow-covered windmill, and the snow-covered trees—something that made him long for flesh-and-blood companionship.

“I suppose when I stop, she’ll rouse up,” said Huxford to himself, as he came into the village, and went up the street, delivering Christmas parcels here

and there, which were hailed by groups of children emerging from warm rooms with loud acclaim, as doors were opened at the waggoner's voice.

At last Huxford led his waggon up the yard of the "Pied Bull." Before entering the inn, he went round to the rear of the vehicle, lifted up the awning, and muttered—

"Still fast asleep! She must ha' been mortal tired, poor thing!"

"What news, Huxford?" said the Barber from behind a cloud, as the waggoner entered the warm parlour, where the fire was well surrounded, and the table well covered with drinking vessels. "What news, Huxford?" And all made a move to allow the new-comer space near the fire.

"News enough! mates," said Huxford. "A merry Christmas to ye all."

"Same to you, and many of 'em," said all the voices together.

"It don't sound Christian-like, Master Waters, to ask a man what's his news before you've bid him a merry Christmas, of a Christmas Eve. Specially when it's blowing and snowing like mad, and he aint had nought to drink."

"Master Waters is always in a main hurry for the

news, you know," said a stout man in the chimney-corner. "He's always a specting a revolootion, or sommat o' that sort, and he says the Dook 'll be shot one o' these days, if so be even the King and Queen's let off, supposing the Reform Bill dunt pass."

"Ha, ha, ha!" replied Huxford. "Folks don't brew revolootions and go out a shooting Dooks of a Christmas Eve; leastways not in a Christian country—here's all your good healths! If you'd a' been in London wi' me yesterday, you'd never a thought there was such things as Governments or Acts of Parliament; people's all a bustling about so, looking so pleased, and coaches and waggins loaded with Christmas hampers blocking up every street. It's a fine sight, is London, specially about Christmas time."

"Well, mate," said Waters, "I begs your pardon for not wishing you a merry Christmas first thing—call for another go at my expense, and tell us the news."

"Thankee kindly, Muster Waters—I'll take it hot with, please 'ee. And as for news, why, fust and foremost, its snowing, and my beasts ha' had a main hard time of it, this journey."

"Ah! we can see its snowing, you know, and of course, its bad for the animals—that's *no* news."

"Well, in the next place, its blowing as well as snowing."

"That's no news, neither; wheugh! there it goes, enough to send the windows in, sure-ly!"

"Well, then, I brought a passenger down wi' me."

"Ah?" said one, enquiringly.

"Old Mr. Jones, to see his daughter-in-law?" said another.

"Mrs. Williams's stuck-up sister come down to a waggin, I dare say," said another.

"No good could come o' wearing them bonnets, and such sleeves, Lord love ye! Pride must have a fall. Aint it her?" said a third.

"No, 'taint," replied Huxford.

Waters slapped his thigh portentously—"It's a government spy!" said he—"I've often been told I was a speaking my sentiments too freely. It's a spy!"

"No, 'taint a spy. At least, not as I knows on. If it is, it's a rum 'un, for it's a woman, and their tongues *do* run so, I judge they'd make mortal queer spies."

"I don't know that," said the stout man in the

corner—"Look how femals goes about, pokin' their heads into things that doesn't concern 'em, and pickin' up matters nobody didn't ought to know but the parties' selves."

"How's she drest?" said Waters.

"Mighty hard to say, poor thing. She warnt drest, that's a fact."

"Wheugh!" said the whole circle at once—"You don't mean to tell us, Huxford——"

"No, I dunt, for I can't, if you want to know what she had on. For there was werry little of it; and as to the quality, I aint no judge. I can tell you how God Amighty drest her, and I shud say she's broke many a heart in her time; for of all the black eyes and long black hair that I ever see, her's beats."

"Well, where did you find her, then?" said the stout man.

"On the road, at nightfall.—I looks ahead of my waggin, and, a little before, I sees a figure walking slowly on, as if her feet was sore, with her head ducked down, to keep the snow from blinding her, I suppose. As well as I could tell, for she was kivered in snow. You see, she was drest in a'most nothing at all, and as I got alongside, I could see the wind

blowing her rags agin her limbs, and how she kept from freezing right up is more than I can make out."

"Somethin' *here*—somethin' *here*!" said the stout man in the corner, patting his left side,—over the region of the heart according to his notions of anatomy, but in point of fact over his waistcoat-pocket, which jingled very pleasantly with gold and silver music.

"Her heart on fire you mean, mate; for she had never a pocket that I could see."

"You *couldn't* see, in course, underneath her frock, mun."

"She had no frock, oney a petticoat instead, thrown over her head from behind; and never a bonnet."

"My God!" was the involuntary whisper that ran round the room.

"When I come alongside, I looked round, and says, 'Where to, friend?'—No answer; no look. 'Where to, friend?' I cried again—'where to, for God's sake!' Now, you've heard neighbour Jenkins over there"—nodding at the stout man—"when he's got a shocking cold,—you've heard him talk, and you know how his voice sounds. Well, it was just such a voice that *I* heard from under the petticoat. 'Where to, for *God's* sake?' says I. '*God* knows, man!'

says the poor thing, and hurried on, as fast as she could. Thinks I, this ull never do : she'll go and dround herself if she can find anywheres where the ice ull break; or mayhap she'll go and hang herself to a tree—but she couldn't ha' done that, I expect, very easily, leastways not with her garters, for she had no stockings on."

"Huxford, you're joking ; it's impossible for one of God Amighty's creeturs to live an hour in such a night on that road, with nothin' on but what she had, —to say nothin' of a woman!"

"I aint joking, Jenkins : what I'm a telling you is gospel truth, if I was never to speak another word."

All the company took large draughts at their glasses.

"So, as I was saying, thinks I, this ull never do, and I stopped the osses. But as soon as ever the poor thing hears me cry 'Wo!' off she runs as fast as she could again, and I had to follow her and bring her back, again, struggling like mad, and crying 'Let me go, man!' Of course I held her fast, and, after a good deal of bother, I got her into the waggin on a heap o' things in front : there she lay, bless you, huddled up under a bit of sacking, and never speaks a word. I shall never forget her bedlamite looks,



poor thing! as I lifted her in—her eyes blazed like the coals in that grate there, and her long hair was all flying wild about her like mad. When I came to the fust inn, I routed her up, and offered her a glass of hot and strong ; and, love ye ! to see how she pushed it away—never opens her lips, and wouldn't have a drop ! ”

“ What on earth did you do, then ? ”

“ Why, I said, Here's an escaped mad woman, and I'm in for it : but seeing the landlady having tea, it came into my head all of a sudden to try her with a cup ; and I did—only I put in a drop of something strong first, being all the while mortal frightened she'd smell it, and say ' no ' again. But she didn't, poor thing ; she took and drunk it off quite christian-like.”

“ Did she say thank you ? ”

“ No, she didn't.”

“ Much obleeged, perhaps ? ”

“ No, she didn't.”

“ What then ? ”

“ She said, ' God reward you ! ' with such a quiet, lamb-like look that I made up my mind in an instant she wasn't mad. I never see such a look in all my life. But it wasn't a look either, that would en

courage a man to talk ; so I only said, 'Take a rest, my lass ; it ull do you good,' and kivered her up as warm as I could. Very soon I heard her breathing main hard, and she slept all the rest of the way here. She's asleep, now in the waggin."

"In the waggin, mate ! Why not have her wrapped up, and brought in ? We'll call Betsy."

"No, you wont call Betsy ; she's my prisoner if *you* please. She is wrapped up warm, with lots of old sacking, and my great coat, and she aint to be woke I tell you. When a poor creetur, perticklerly a female, is got anything wrong *here*,—*you* know, Jenkins,—what *I* say, is, let her sleep it out,—let her sleep it out ! She'll wake up before bed-time, and heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb !"

"This *is* a Christmas Eve story," said Mr. Jenkins, "as astonishing a story as ever *I* heard o' my born days ! Howasever, you've done *your* part, Huxford, like a man and a Christian——"

"And my old woman ull do hers," said the waggoner.

"And we'll do ours," resumed Jenkins. "Fust and foremost, there's my crown-piece, and if any one likes to better it, welcome !" and crown-piece after crown-piece came ringing down upon the table, till quite an imposing little fund was formed. Jenkins

piled up the coins together, and there was a few moments' silence.

"It seems very awful like, neighbours, about this poor thing," said one.

"Better go and tell Dobbs," said another.

"Or the Parson," said a third.

"Or the Doctor," said a fourth.

"Or both," said Waters.

"Let's all be thankful we've got our homes to go to, such a night as this," observed Huxford, with a really devout and impressive manner.

"Amen!" was repeated round the room, and there was another pause. But the silence was suddenly broken, when a very small man, who had not spoken ten words the whole evening, struck up "Home, sweet home!" and he was speedily joined by all the other voices.

In the midst of the song, one of the ostlers came tearing in, looking as frightened as possible, and laid his hand on the waggoner's sleeve—

"Huxford," said he, "as I'm a living man, there be something alive in your waggin, and it be'n't a dog nuther!"

"You're a fool," said the waggoner; "leave the waggon alone!"

"I be'nt a fool though, and its got large saucer eyes blazing like fire, and hair down to its feet, and it's all in white, as sure as I'm standing here. I heard a rustling in the straw, and I looked in!"

"Come with me," whispered Huxford, "and stand aside, mind, while *I* look in."

A second or two brought him back to the parlour, considerably astonished and disconcerted. "She's gone, by God!" he shouted out.

"Gone!" cried all at one and at the same moment. "It beats everything!"

"Just what I expected," said Waters.

"You're a safe hand at expecting, mate; you take care to expect after things have happened," said the waggoner, as the party broke up in confusion, after each had reclaimed his crown-piece.

It was difficult to say which was more beset with inquisitive customers for the rest of that Christmas Eve—the inn or the Barber's shop. The Barber waxed eloquent, and lacerated many chins, besides cutting fine heads of hair into all sorts of notchy patterns, as he dilated upon such points in the waggoner's story as enabled him to give it a political turn. The strange passenger was not a government spy, but she was undoubtedly the victim of "some

heartless aristocrat." There must be a change before long, Sir. Depend upon it, Sir, we were getting too enlightened to stand it now-a-days. The aristocracy must be let down a peg, that was what it was, Sir; the pension-list must be abolished; and the bishops, Sir, must be sent about their business. The people were rising in their might, and reform was the order of the day. That wretched woman, Sir, was a victim to the present system of things, and a Reform Bill we must and would have. If he liked, and it was safe, he could tell you a thing or two—but time would show who were the people's friends. As Dobbs was not present, the Barber had the argument all to himself, and was loud, long, and, doubtless, convincing.

### III.

#### THE POPLAR TREE.

WHILE the Radical party who frequented the "Pied Bull," were discussing the strange traveller's strangeness, sufferings, and probable history, with more fulness than has been related in the preceding chapter,—another party of village gossipers were talking round the fire in a room at the "Rainbow and Rat-trap." It was the adherents to the aristocratic point of view who patronised the "Rainbow and Rat-trap," and not without an incidental propriety ; for, doubtless, the origin of such a name to an inn must remount to a very remote, respectable, probably feudal period. Perhaps the authority who first determined that "Pig and Whistle" is a corruption of Peg and Wassail will take the trouble to trace the "Rainbow and Rat-trap" to some satisfactory origin.

It has been said, times out of number, that truth is stranger than fiction, and perhaps it is ; but the question is not very important, because both

truth and fiction will have their way, strange or not.

The subject under debate in the parlour of the "Rainbow and Rat-trap," was the relative strength of man's and woman's affection, and the argument was carried on with great spirit.

"I dunt keer a bit ; women's as fickle as weather-cocks, and more fickler, when they likes. They didn't ought to be confided in," said one.

"If you've got a secret, confide it to your own boosom, and don't tell no one ; but particklerly not a wooman—that's what I say," was the observation of another.

"Look at Mister Coldcockle : he was jilted by a woman which seemed a angel of heaven, and he's never got over it, and he'll die a bachelor, that man will, cussing the fickleness of femals. Show me the femal that makes a old maid of herself, and leads the miserable life Coldcockle does, all for love. Lor' love ye ! it aint in 'em."

"That's it, that's exactly what it is ; the lightness of a woman's mind, is lighter than feather, dust or wind—as the poet says."

"I think," observed the only one of the group who appeared a stranger, "I think we're hard upon

the poor things. Women bore us, and suckled us, and nursed us, and tended us—”

“That’s true,” was the unanimous murmur.  
“And Our Saviour was born of a woman—”

“That’s true, and we ought to ha’ remembered it, of a Christmas Eve.”

“And, as for their telling everybody, if they happen to have been crossed in love; letting all the world know it, why *that* isn’t in them, I take it. I expect a woman who has really been disappointed in any heart affair,—mind you, I mean the real thing, no sham, or half-and-half love and heart-breaking,—keeps it pretty close, and does not mention it even in her prayers. So you would not know it perhaps quite as easily as you seem to know all about Mr. —”

“Coldcockle.”

“About Mr. Coldcockle, if there were ever such a broken-hearted old maid in this village.”

“There’s somethun in that.”

“As for Mr. Coldcockle leading a miserable life, its what he has no business to do; and it is what a woman does not often do, let me tell you. Do what you like with her, and she ’ll go about



doing kind things with a cheerful face, and a chatty tongue —— ”

“ That’s what Old Coldcockle don’t do, anyhow !”  
(Roars of laughter.)

“ You should see a beggar ask Coldcockle for a halfpenny, on a night like this !”

“ Ha, ha, ha ! Coldcockle giving a halfpenny to a beggar ! It ud be putt in the paper !”

As it grew late, the company dropped off one by one, and only a decent young man was left, who for some reason or other seemed loth to quit the room.

“ Well, friend,” said the stranger, as they drew closer to the fire—“ what do you think about all this ?”

“ I can’t say I like their way of speaking about women,” replied the young man—“ women aint cats and dogs, or inferior creatures of any kind—but they often talk like this. They leave their wives and daughters moiling and drudging at home, while they come here to smoke their pipes, and drink, and talk politics and stuff, and go on about ’em, as if they were dirt.”

“ I suppose you mean to do differently when *you’re* married ?”

"Well, I should hope so. If I don't, may I be thrashed twice a-week till I mend my manners, that's all! But I've heard say that foreign women are a good deal more fickle than English?"

The stranger smiled—rather a melancholy smile.

"That does not agree with *my* experience, at any rate," said he.

"Then you have been abroad, I suppose?"

"In France."

"Oh!" This was said half interrogatively, and with that eagerness under a mask of quietude which bespeaks curiosity afraid of being impertinent. The stranger refilled a pipe, and resumed.

"Yes, I have been in France. I can't say, for I don't know, whether I was wise or not to go. You can't say whether half the things you do are wise or foolish. But I was *almost* forced to go. No—nothing of that sort—you need not open your eyes; the compulsion was all in my own feelings. In fact—but no, I do not think I *can* tell you about that."

There was a pause of some seconds, during which both men whiffed away at their pipes. Drawing in his breath rather heavily, the stranger began again.

"Yes, I went to France, and saw a good deal, and

wandered about, and spent all my money. Late one evening, weary, foot-sore, miserable, hungry—very hungry indeed, for I had not eaten for two days—I sat down at the road-side, unable to push my way any further until I had rested. After a while, I resumed the path, as it was growing quite dark; and being weak and faint, I suppose I stumbled against a stone or the stump of a tree, for I fell, and only recovered my senses to find myself inside a cottage, with a young girl bathing my temple, which was still bleeding from the effect, of course, of a blow I had given myself in the fall. There were present in the room her father, and a younger brother and sister. Her mother was dead, and she was the joy and pride of her other parent.”

“Was she pretty? Excuse my interrupting you.”

“Yes, she was pretty.”

“Frenchwomen *are* pretty, I have heard?”

“I do not think they are nearly so pretty as Englishwomen, taking them generally. But this girl was really goodlooking——”

“And you fell in love with her, I suppose?”

“No; there was a reason against that. And even if there had not been, I do not think I should have

fallen in love with poor little Marie, for her face was not of the kind that attracts me. You may see a hundred pretty countenances in a day, and not one you would like to see on the shoulders of a partner for life.

“ Well, I was fain to try the wide world again in a day or two, after pouring out my heart in thanks to the kind souls in the cottage ; for I had a feeling of independence in me which made me unwilling to stay a day longer than weakness and my wound made absolutely necessary. But I found it impossible to get away. The old man discovered that there was light work to be done on his farm, with which I might amuse myself if I pleased : the two children had found me, even in the course of a stay of forty-eight hours, too agreeable a companion to be let go, bless their hearts ! And Marie, poor thing, was sure that it would be certain death if I ventured to push my fortunes until I was more fully recovered. My face, she said, was so pale and so thin, and my lips so feverish ; and was not her poor father working himself into the grave ? What would become of her if she lost him ? Why could I not stay and help him for a little time ? And father, and daughter, and children urged their pleas, one and all, with such vivacity and force, that at

last I agreed to stay a little while longer. And though the old man was hale and hearty, and not excessively overworked, considering all things, I did not only a fair share, but more than a fair share, of the farm work. I stayed week after week, grew familiar, received unabated kindness. I wish—I wish——” The stranger paused with emotion, and seemed much disturbed.

“ You were going to say you wished——”

“ Yes ; I wish, almost, that I had never seen that cottage—that I had been allowed to bleed away in the cold night-air—that I had never been to France ! And yet I do *not* wish either of those things. I went away from England more firmly convinced than any of those good people who have just left the room, that woman’s heart is fickle, and that her love is a sham, and I am now sure that it is a reality, and that she may be as faithful as she is fond. I do not know, mind you, that it is always so ; I fear it is not—perhaps I shall know before I leave this place.”

“ Before you leave this place?—”

“ Yes. Never mind, friend ! Well, poor Marie fell in love with me. I am not a vain man, but I could not mistake. She not only nursed me with more than a mother’s kindness till I was quite strong

again, but she invented wants for me, and waited about me with such a sweet and watchful tenderness that I was sometimes disposed to call myself hard names for not returning her love. For love her I could not.

“But alas! alas! her tenderness stirred within my heart remembrances and doubts which made me long to get back to England again, and after some sleepless nights of irresolution and feverishness—for Marie and her father pressed me all day and every day to stay with them, and I grieved for their loneliness and regrets when I should be gone—I made up my mind that go I must. And go I did. The children were loud in their sorrow: the old man shed a few tears, and looked into my face till my heart was aching, and I feared I must cry right out. Marie, who had got up that morning with red eyes, bade me farewell with drooped eyelids and few words, but did not weep. Her father insisted on lending me a little money, to be repaid when I should reach England, and be able to send it to him. I left the cottage.

“But I had not got far down the road, when I heard footsteps behind me, and I soon saw it was poor Marie, weary and out of breath, who was upon my

track. The fact is, I had run away, almost, from the cottage, as soon as I thought the trees and a bend in the road would conceal my mode of making progress, and the poor girl was panting when she came up. I seated her at the root of a poplar-tree on the bank.

“When she had taken breath I said—

“Well, Marie, it is very kind of you to run after me all this way—I suppose I have forgotten something?”

“No, she said, it was she who had forgotten—then, holding out a prettily-made purse—‘Keep this for my sake,’ said she, ‘and think of me in England!’

“I held out my hands for the purse, looking my gratitude, and mentally feeling for words; but she would not put it into my hands—‘No, no; hold your pocket—your vest-pocket,’ said she; and into my vest-pocket she put it. I could only say—

“‘O Marie! why, why must I leave you? But I feel that I must! I shall think of you, pray for you, weep for you, every night of my life! Dear friend, God bless you; a thousand times!’”

“The poor girl seized my hand in an instant, gave it one short, sharp, passionate kiss, and was gone

like lightning. I watched her light figure retreating across the field, and when I could see it no longer, I ejaculated 'O God! Bless her, and hers!' and relieved my mind by a good cry. And to tell truth, I could cry *now*.

"What *is* love? Here was this sweet girl, who would have given her soul to ransom mine; and I, for my part, was fonder of her than brother could be of sister,—and yet, fond and grateful as I was, I felt that I could not have taken her to my bosom for a life-long partner!"

"I've heard say, love beats everything," observed the young man, "but I never knew any one that understood it. I suppose it's been always the same, from Adam and Eve down to now, and will be to the end of the world."

"I expect it will," said the stranger.

"But the story you've been telling me does not make out that women are *constant* in love. How long were you at the cottage, sir?"

"About three months. But I have been in England six; and, in reply to a letter I sent, with the money in it, and a little over—for I enclosed a five-pound note—I have just got one from the old man to say that his daughter is very ill, and in her



delirium she has been calling on my name. You know poor people in France employ scribes to write their letters for them when they can't write themselves, which is very often, and in this instance, is the case."

"We English, with our strict notions, should not like that. But I've heard say that we had professional letter-writers and drawers-up of petitions in England, and even in London, till lately?"

"Lately? I saw a bill up in Rotherhithe, only the other day,—Rotherhithe is the sailors' district, at the east end of London, you know,—announcing that some one (I forget his name) wrote letters and drew up petitions on reasonable terms."

"Bless me!"

"But did I tell you that there was something in the purse which that poor dear girl gave me? I think not. But she had put up all her little savings for me, thinking, and not without reason, that I might be hard pushed in getting back to England, and even after I got there. She is an angel!"

There was another pause, during which nothing was heard but the faint puffing and crackling of the fire.

"I have come down to this village," said the

stranger, "expressly to see if I can't find out an old friend, and learn something from him which may help me to make up my mind a little better about the faithfulness of woman's love. One swallow don't make a summer, you know ; and I did once—but that's past !"

"They say a mother's love is stronger than death ; and I've heard our doctor tell stories of the scenes he has witnessed with women going broken-hearted and silly-like over their babies. Oh, its heart-rending to hear him tell them !"

"A mother's love ?" replied the stranger, interrogatively and abstractedly, "*a mother's love* ? Perhaps—but, just now, I can see nothing but a poplar tree by a roadside, with a pale-faced girl looking up into my own face."

#### IV.

##### THE WANDERER ON THE GRAVE-STONE.

WHEN Mr. Gray, the Clergyman, reached the Sexton's cottage, he found unmistakable symptoms of Christmas Eve in the room where the children were assembled. The Christmas candles were spread out upon the table, and the youngest little one was insisting upon having the lion's (or spoiled boy's) share. The noise was something terrific to any but a family man, like Mr. Gray; and though Mrs. Dobbs' voice was heard, like the cry of the curlew over the storm, demanding silence, it was not till a curly-headed youngster felt a hand upon his head, and looked up, expecting to see father, that the little party realised the awful fact that the Parson had been a witness of their contentions and their clamour! Then, heads were hung, fingers were thrust into the mouth, and the most obstreperous of the party stole into a corner.

"Dobbs will be back with the book directly, Sir," said Mrs. Dobbs.

"I can't think how I came to leave it in the pulpit on Sunday," said the Clergyman; "and it was only this afternoon that I missed it, and found I wanted it."

Dobbs *was* back directly, but not with the book. He jerked himself in at the door, and, without noticing Mr. Gray, otherwise than by a glance, sank, pale and affrighted, into a chair.

"Gracious! Dobbs," said his wondering spouse, "what's the matter?"

"Brandy!" said Dobbs, faintly.

When the restorative had been administered, and Dobbs began to look about him, he begged a thousand pardons of Mr. Gray. His next business was to fumble about after his keys, without finding them.

"I've lost 'em! I've dropped 'em in the snow. You'll have to break open the door to-morrow—or to pick the lock—and to think of *that*. Oh dear, oh dear! Lord, deliver us. Amen!"

"Why, my good friend; what can have happened to make you lose your keys? You are generally so very careful of them."

"O yes, O yes, O yes! It aint the keys so much as the ghost—"

"The ghost!" cried Mr. Gray, and Mrs. Dobbs, and the children, two of whom burst out crying.

"Yes, the ghost! You smile, Sir; but I shall believe in ghosts to my dying day. As sure as I'm a living man, and speaking in the Almighty's presence, there's a figure all in white seated on Mr. Bickerton's family grave, on the right-hand side as you go into the churchyard."

"Ha, ha, ha! Dobbs, Dobbs, Dobbs!" said the Clergyman—"it sa heap of snow, of course, blown into some strange shape or other: I thought you were a sharp fellow, Dobbs."

"Sharp fellow, Sir? Its no heap of snow, but one of the Almighty's creatures as sure as I am; and it *must* be a ghost, because no flesh and blood could go and pick out a grave-stone for a seat on such a night as this. I ran home as quick as my legs would carry me, and I must have dropped my keys in the snow somewhere."

"My friend," said Mr. Gray, "this is Christmas Eve, and we ought at such a season to have our minds well fortified by thoughts of the compassionate Saviour who knows our infirmities, and watches over us from the throne of his glory. I have no fear of

ghosts ; but your positiveness is a little singular, and I propose that you and I set out together, with your dark lanthorn, to see what it is that has caused you this alarm."

"I know what it is," said Mrs. Dobbs. "As sure as eggs is eggs, Dobbs, its one of the boys set on by that Barber. He's blackguard enough,—saving *your* presence, Sir—for anything ; and he's found out you was going to the church for something, and laid a plan for making a fool of you. You'll be the laughing-stock of the village for months ! Why didn't you go up and shake him well, like a man ?"

"Its all very fine," replied poor Dobbs, "but I shook, myself."

"It would be a chilly sort of freak for a boy, Mrs. Dobbs, and I don't think there's one in the place, from the Squire's sons to the monitors in the school, that would have the courage to go and act the ghost in the churchyard to-night."

"O, boys 'll do anything, Sir, when they're pushed on ; and Waters wouldn't mind giving one of 'em half-a-crown to spite Dobbs. That's what it is, Sir, or I don't know how to make a pie-crust."

"Well," cried Dobbs, growing courageous as the thought of being befooled worked its way into his

wits,—“ I shouldn’t wonder if you’re right, Goody. Let’s go, Sir. And give me my crab-stick. If I don’t give him sore bones, I’ll see what it sticks at !”

“ But you don’t suppose he’d stay there, after he’d frightened you well, do you, man ?” said the spouse—“ Don’t be a fool, Dobbs !”

“ Lor’, no ; perhaps not ! Howasever, I’ll take the stick.”

Off they went, Clergyman and Sexton, and a few minutes brought them within sight of the graveyard. There, surely enough, distinguishable even through the fast-falling snow, they saw what appeared to be a human form seated upon the very grave-stone mentioned by Dobbs, and quite motionless. For one brief moment the Clergyman paused, and then, taking the lanthorn from his companion, went on very softly in advance. Without producing any sign of life in the white figure before them, the Clergyman approached quite near, and then threw the light from the lanthorn full in front of it. It fell upon a pair of dark eyes that gleamed wildly from a face half covered with long, jetty hair.

“ Father of Mercies !” said Mr. Gray—“ It’s a woman !”

"And almost naked. She's mad, Sir, she's mad : take care !"

"Not mad, Father of Mercies !" said the wretched creature, starting up. "But stand back ! I will die under God's sky this night ! No roof of yours for me !"

For a moment Mr. Gray drew back, startled, almost appalled. As he paused, there was heard in the distance a sound of music ; it was a band of young people practising a Christmas hymn for the morrow, accompanied by a violin and a flute. Mr. Gray thought the unhappy one seemed to listen, and seized the instant to speak again :—

"Your Heavenly Father and mine has sent me to rescue you, and by his holy name I declare I will not leave you here. Come ! It is Christmas Eve, a meet time to seek and save the lost. Come ! And may God help you, where human help can be of no avail !"

It never for a second crossed Mr. Gray's mind that the poor thing was mad : the light of intelligence in her eye was bright and unmistakable. That mysterious something which bespeaks a spirit fallen from its high estate, reason descended from her throne, a quenching cloud over the sunshine of thought, was not there ; not on that forehead, nor in that blazing



eye, nor in the quivering vehemence of that hoarse voice. A person, indeed, of the Sexton's coarseness of intellect might be excused for crying out—"She's mad—she's mad, Sir!" because sitting, half-naked, on a grave-stone in a snowy night is not the act of a sane person, and sextons cannot be expected to appreciate the expression of different countenances with psychological nicety. But, to a cultivated perception like Mr. Gray's, the wanderer was a miserable, much-enduring, deliriously-excited woman, yet in her senses. To his last words she had made no reply, but stood with drooped head and clasped hands, as if trying to collect her thoughts, or to decide some anxious question.

"I promise you," resumed Mr. Gray, with an utterance at once compassionate and energetic, "you shall meet only loving care and watchfulness for your soul's health, if you come with me!"

This time the woman raised her dark, bloodshot eyes, and looked the speaker full in the face. That look removed one lingering doubt from Mr. Gray's mind. Underneath that wildness and rage, there was not the quivering of a conscience agonized with the recollection of recent crime.

"Come!" said he, stretching out his hands.

Without a word, but with an uncertain step, the wanderer moved towards him.

The Clergyman reflected a moment, as he took her hand, and found it hot, fever-hot, when the moisture of the snow was gone. The Sexton's house was the nearest; but the Sexton and his wife were not the people to whom to confide this strange, stricken, suffering being. She wanted more than material kindness. There was the "mind diseased," and the rude, the unchastised of soul could not "minister to" it. In the course of his brief discussion with himself, the Clergyman came to two conclusions. One was, that he would not run any risk of alarming the unhappy creature whom heaven had committed to his keeping, by at once calling in medical aid, but that he would suggest such things as occurred to his own, not unpractised judgment, with respect to her treatment. The other was, that the Widow Clinton, long, long familiar with grief, was the woman to bind up the wounds of this lorn sister.

"Dobbs," said Mr. Gray, "make haste home; get your wife to put the children to bed; tell her to have some clothes warmed ready; and, Dobbs, don't forget some tea, with a *little*, only a *little*, brandy in it."

With a hurried attempt at expostulation, and looks of alarm, Dobbs went off to do as he was bid. On the way to his cottage, the wanderer resisted all attempts made by the minister to induce her to accept his cloak, waving it off with the simple words—"You need it." When the pair reached Dobbs's cottage, they found everything ready; but that functionary's partner, frightened, no doubt, at his rapid description of the expected visitor, had left gown, bonnet, shawl, hose, shoes, tea, and brandy to take care of themselves before a fire which she would have called "a roarer," and retreated to another apartment. She always knew no good could come of the fresh minister's new-fangled notions, and now he was bringing a mad woman, or a runaway murderess, or a bad fever into her house—pretty goings on! and she hoped, *that* she did, that it might be the worst! But some folks was unket and unaccountable, and she always said that there was something in that minister that——" At that point in Mrs. Dobbs's address, she heard one of the little ones up-stairs, singing, half-above, half-under, the bed-clothes—"God rest you, merry gentlemen. Let nothing you dismay!" And thinking, perhaps, that the counsel implied in that apostrophe was

intended for women, as well as "gentlemen," and even for sexton's wives, she said no more.

When the outcast was led in, she paused a moment at the threshold, then allowed herself to be placed in a chair. "Do not sit too near the fire," said the minister. As the ruddy light fell upon her figure, he saw, by her hands, arms, and naked feet, that she did not belong to the humblest class, and formed many conjectures about her history, without finding in either any satisfactory solution of the enigma of her present condition. Pouring out the tea, he addressed her again, as she sat with her head buried in her hands, both arms resting on her knee.

"After you have rested and refreshed yourself, my friend," said the Clergyman, "you can dress, while this good man and I talk over some matters for to-morrow, in the next room." As he spoke he gave an involuntary glance at the door, thinking doubtless of the defiant wildness and defiant words of the wanderer when she started from the grave-stone. The glance was noticed.

"Do what you will with me!" said she.

And, Dobbs having gone out first, she sprung forward, as Mr. Gray was leaving the room, seized his hand, and kneeling down, kissed it madly.

"Let me kneel, let me kneel, for God's sake!" she continued, as the minister endeavoured to raise her from the floor. "Let me kneel! Forgive me! O forgive me!"

In respectful and tearful silence, Mr. Gray led her to her seat again.

"There is another to whom I must kneel," said she. "Tell me who is the carrier to this place, and bring me to him, for pity's sake!"

As the Clergyman replied, he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Dobbs, who had summoned courage to peep in at the room-door, and had overheard a few words. There was a budget of mystery! Old Huxford had some sort of connection with that baggage, and who could see the end of it?

"Mrs. Dobbs; good Mrs. Dobbs!" said Mr. Gray. "Be kind to that poor creature. Help her to wash her hands and face, and feet—in tepid water—lukewarm you know—and to dress." And Mrs. Dobbs curtsied, and grew compassionate, bowed and softened by a coin slipped into her willing palm.

When Mrs. Dobbs came to announce that the visitor was dressed, and that "Lor', Sir! but she *do* look quite handsome, only there's *something* the matter with her right hand!" the Clergyman returned

to the room where he had left her. There was a startling change in her appearance. Not only was there great beauty making itself felt through haggardness, emaciation, and the ungainliness of borrowed attire; but the defiant air was gone, though the bewilderment and horror yet lingered in the eye and trembled on the lip. There was a burning spot on each cheek, where shortly before there had been an awful pallor, and as she rose at the entrance of her protector, it was manifest that she supported herself with extreme difficulty. The hand Mr. Gray took in his own was hotter than ever, and as he felt the pulse, which was furious though feeble, he changed one of the resolutions to which he had previously come.

“ You are in a high fever, my poor girl ! we must have the Doctor to you ! There is no conveyance to be had, but you cannot stay *here*. Dobbs and I will support you, if you can walk a little way : and I will see you are well cared for.”

## V.

### THE EASY CHAIR AND THE CHURCH PORCH.

THERE is hardly a more sacred looking object in the world than a sick person, more especially a sick woman, approaching convalescence, seated in an easy chair in the living-room. The mood which comes over you in the chamber where a sufferer is languishing or tossing on a bed of agony or peril is almost purely painful. But there is a sweet, soft, hopeful sanctity about the place where a fellow-creature who has recently emerged from the valley of the shadow of death is learning to smile and be cheerful again, giving love for love, and thought for thought, to the healthy and the strong who have watched the pale face, and translated the half-articulate moan in the still midnight,—as the Widow Clinton has done since we last met her, for the poor creature confided to her care by the Clergyman.

We left Widow Clinton on a certain Christmas Eve, with tears standing in her eyes, and some old grief present to her thoughts: but it will not be doubted

that, at sight of the wretched, stricken sister, brought to her by Mr. Gray, she forgot her own troubles, whatever they were, and ministered to the forlorn one, according to her need, great as that was. A tall girl was sent from the village school to help Widow Clinton with her shop and her household affairs, and she served the further purpose of saving the Widow from a good deal of questioning by anxious gossips. For, of course, any one in want of information, would be disposed rather to ask the girl in the shop than the Widow—her youth and inexperience making her more communicative.

Anxious gossips enough there were, and many and wild were the speculations afloat concerning the past, present, and future of the wanderer who had been found on the grave-stone. Old Huxford had told his story to inquisitive people till he had got it by heart, and came to repeat it in showman's fashion. Never before, in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, had Mr. Gray, or the Clergyman who was his predecessor, and the Doctor, been closeted so often with a patient. Sally, the tall girl, whose discretion was not above the average, and whose delicacy of feeling was not of the highest, had let fall, in strict confidence, to very peculiar friends, you know, stray phrases dropped by



the poor patient in her delirious moments; and, of course, the peculiar friends had retailed, or rather wholesaled, what they had heard to peculiarly peculiar friends of their own, "with corrections and additions."

Nor was this all the mystery that hung over the village about this period. The stranger who had been at the "Rainbow and Rat-trap" on Christmas Eve, had met Mr. Macmurdo, the great manufacturer of the nearest town, in the church porch on Christmas morning, and after a hearty recognition, had walked off, and stepped into the carriage with him. Rumours of some mysterious connection between them were rife; and it soon became village-talk that Mr. Macmurdo was going to send him to France, and make a rich man of him, and in fact that the day for his departure had been twice fixed, but that the stranger did not seem willing to go just yet. Finally, Mr. Macmurdo had been seen to drive up to the Clergyman's door, had passed some time in the house, and had actually gone on foot to the Widow Clinton's, where however, his stay had been very short indeed, and it was believed he had only made enquiries after the sick woman, or, perhaps, left a little money for her. And still the stranger lingered about between the town and the village. He had not been

near Widow Clinton's, but Huxford, the carrier, had ; and he and Huxford were often together. So strong a case of political significancy in these circumstances was made out by the barber, that the already weakened prestige of the clerk's judgment could not hold out against the impression created in the village, and quidnuncs were prepared for some fearful convulsion, in which mounted policemen, soldiery, and slaughter would be natural elements.

It is now about three weeks after Christmas, and the expression upon Widow Clinton's countenance, as she bends over the pale, large-eyed sufferer's chair, is one of pity and kindness mixed. There is an intelligent smile playing round the lips of the convalescent, as she says—

“My name is no secret. Call me Helen Ward. I think I could go to church on Sunday. I should like to pray for you *there* !”

“Well, we will see whether you are strong enough, and whether it is fine, when the time comes.”

“O, I feel quite strong again, now ; I do indeed. Let me do some needle-work for you. It will fatigue me less than reading.”

“I think you had better not try at present : the doctor says, you know, your finger was very badly

managed before, and it is a wonder you did not lose the use of it——”

“ I did almost——”

“ Yes, I dare say—but we mean to take care of you now.”

“ Well, I am determined to go to church on Sunday, if I continue to improve. I do so long to be out again, and see something happy and blessed.”

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Sunday comes round before, but *hardly* before, every one in the village knows that the name of Widow Clinton's patient is Helen Ward. It is a beautiful morning, cold, but sunny, with the snow, which lies about, sparkling like diamonds, and something in the aspect of nature which seems to say, “ The worst of the winter is over and gone, and we must really begin to think of spring, though it is still January !”

Helen has left her arm-chair to-day, and walked to church with Widow Clinton, managing to be there very early indeed, so as to escape observation as much as possible, while upon the road. Inside the church, she keeps her veil closely drawn down, and soon

becomes too closely absorbed in the service to notice that many eyes are turned upon her, Mr. Macmurdo's among others. Indeed, she does not see Mr. Macmurdo, or notice the stranger whom we met first at the "Rainbow and Rat-trap," as he enters the church rather late, and, with an excited countenance and manner, takes a seat in the aisle just within sight of her pew. She does not even turn her head, as, after remaining seated a minute or two, he abruptly rises, and leaves the church with so little nicety of step, and such a disturbing suddenness, that all the congregation are startled, and the beadle jumps up, looks round indignantly, follows the almost brawler outside the building, remains without a few minutes, and returns on tip-toe, with the look of a man whose mind was overcharged with vital secrets. Of course, Helen cannot be expected to know that, on his way to the village church, the stranger has heard her name, has been to Widow Clinton's, and has come from there to the church, after walking about in a state of semi-distraction for nearly an hour.

When the psalm is sung, and the prayer said, and the sermon preached, and the benediction pronounced, but before the organist has had time to begin his voluntary, Mr. Macmurdo hurries out,

leaps into his gig, and drives furiously away. It was universally remarked that Mr. Macmurdo, who was a slow-going, cautious man, had never been seen to drive so fast before.

In the church-porch, as the congregation departs, there is an evident tendency to loitering and crowding, and the very school-children linger about, as if with the presentiment that something is coming. Extremely quick-sighted people observe that the stranger who had disturbed the service, though without any apparent design of doing so, is waiting and watching, as if he were anxious to keep his eye upon some one, without being himself observed. And people with no particular quick-sightedness are forced to observe, by-and-bye, that he is unsuccessful in his efforts, for his eye is suddenly caught by Helen Ward, who sinks, with a suppressed scream, into the Widow's arms and his, as he rushes forward to prevent her falling.

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It is evening of the same day. There has been a brief consultation between the Stranger, the Clergyman, the Doctor, and the Widow. Helen is again in the arm-chair, with Mrs. Clinton bending over her,

and some restoratives on the table at her side. She is paler than ever, but her lips are compressed, and her air is characterised by the firmness of one who expects a struggle, and does not flinch from a pain that *must* come.

"If he wishes to see me, let it be now," said she, "I shall not sleep till it is past!"

"Then I will bring him in at once."

And Mrs. Clinton went out and returned with the stranger, whose face was as pale as Helen's, while his frame trembled like a girl's.

"Will you leave us alone, dear friend?" said Helen, without once lifting her eyes to the stranger's face. "I shall want nothing—all will be well." So Mrs. Clinton, after a moment's hesitation, withdrew, and they two were left alone.

In an instant Helen raised her dark, firmly-set eyes to the stranger's, and said, with clearness and emphasis, "Edward, I have suffered too much to keep any resentful feeling; but let us say what is to be said, and part. This meeting is of your seeking: tell me what it is you wish to say, and leave me in peace!"

"Helen," said Edward, speaking with difficulty, "God only knows how *I* have suffered, and it seems you too have—"

At this moment, the Widow, tapping hastily at the door, without waiting for the "Come in!" entered with a note in her hand from the Clergyman. It was written at Mr. Macmurdo's bed-side. He had been thrown from his gig, and was very seriously injured.

"Mr. Macmurdo—"

"O heaven!" interrupted Helen.

"Mr. Macmurdo is not expected to live, but he raves for you both, and says he has wronged you, and asks your forgiveness, as he asks pardon of God Almighty. 'Say,' he says, 'that I deceived them both! Say'——"

But, while this was being spoken, Edward had fallen on one knee before Helen, who, scarcely knowing what she did, had yielded her hand to him.

"This is too strange!" cried both together.  
 "Mysterious providence!"

"There is a horse waiting to take you to Mr. Macmurdo's, Sir;" interrupted the Widow.

"Go," said Helen! "Go, Edward! my head whirls! my heart will burst! What is all this?"

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I may say here, that a letter dropped into the post-office at E——, within a day or two of the

scene in the church-porch, contained some curious passages :—

“ I quite feel your reproaches about the aimlessness of my life ; but while I cannot deny their correctness, I cannot, on the other hand, blame myself. I really begin to think I was *made* for an objectless existence. Here am I, as you say, at the very age when aspiration and scheming are ripest in most minds, and I continue absolutely without a plan or an ambition. I have a presentiment that I shall lay down the pencil, palette, and mortal coil together, without having done a useful thing !

“ I have been dawdling on here, in the old way. Sketches enough from the surrounding scenery. But I have an occasional flash of insight into a man or a woman through thê face, which satisfies me that portrait-painting is my vocation, *if* I have a vocation,—which is doubtful. I have recognised here a face that I met in France last May, and the wearer of it is, in some inexplicable way, connected with the mystery which is all the gossip in the place, and I must really stay and see the play played out. In fact, I find E—— very amusing altogether, and after the rattle of Paris, I do not know that a whole twelve-month or so of country life will do me any harm.”



## VI.

### THE MAY-BLOSSOMS.

WIDOW CLINTON's shop was closed. So were most of the affairs of the late Mr. Macmurdo, under the provisions of his will. His property was bequeathed to the stranger who had visited the "Rainbow and Rat-trap" last Christmas Eve. The spring was far advanced, the hedges were white with blossom, and two persons of different sex, whom you have seen before, were walking, clasped in each other's arms—so closely clasped, that walking was not very easy—in a beautiful lane between the village and the town.

"It was just such a grey, dusky evening as this, when I went to the spot fixed by that dead man, Helen, and saw you walking across the street with him. From his wearing a cloak, I judged he was a foreigner—but of course that disguise was adopted to prevent my recognizing his gait and carriage."

"May God forgive him his treachery, as I hope we have done!" replied Helen.

"It's daringness was what surprised me—for he was never a bold man."

"What surprises me more than that is, that, when he found I was down in this village, and must have heard of my sufferings, and known how I shunned and dreaded him, he should still have dreamt—but it is of no use wondering. He is gone, and we must try and think kindly of him."

"It was nothing surprising that he should be selected as a partner by O—— and S—— to manage the establishment over there; for he stood next to me, in point of seniority, and was my superior in many business qualities. In my misery and desperation when I found that you were, as I believed, false to me, I communicated with no one—I became a wretched vagabond—no doubt, the firm believed I was dead, and their need for some one in U—— was urgent. That the unhappy man who sinned against us should have made money so rapidly, and then that I should have it bequeathed to me by him, and, after all, fill the very position of which he had robbed me, and the very arms from which he succeeded for a while in dismissing me, is ——"

The rest of this sentence was inaudible; but there

was an embrace, with many kisses, and that was followed by a brief silence.

“But I should never, humanly speaking, have returned to England, if it had not been for that poor French maiden, whose love awakened strange yearnings in my heart, and struck a faint spark of doubt in my mind, which would not let me rest. ‘Go back to England; seek out Mr. Macmurdo; enquire about him in a neighbourhood where he is known, before you see him: learn what his character is’——in fact, I cannot put into words the vague whispers that seemed to be making themselves heard in my soul, during my stay in the cottage; but I understood them, obeyed them, came to the village, met the departed at the church, saw him from time to time, was dissatisfied and doubtful, and did not like his wanting to send me back to France, on a commercial errand, though it would have paid me very well. When I heard in the village of your mysterious arrival, and got from day to day scraps of intelligence about you, I was interested, I know not how or why, and retained here by some undefinable attraction, which I could not break through; and——and——here, dear Helen, is the end!”

“Not quite the *end*, dear Edward! And because it is *not* the end, because the end is yet to come, there is something I must tell you, which you do not yet know. I feel as if you *ought* to know it before you call me wife. Let us walk softly under these trees—and, see how beautifully the moon is up!—and I will tell you.

“You know how Mr. Macmurdo, in revenge for my refusing him, after he had made me believe you had deserted me for another, slandered me or managed to have me slandered to those parvenu people, in a way which was sure to tell against a poor governess and ruin her, if she were without relatives or friends to fall back upon, as he knew was my case. You know how, in struggling to exclude him on the evening when he was so violent,—don’t shudder, Edward!—I injured my hand in our scuffle at the door, and was obliged to give up the needlework on which I had been subsisting for many months. You know that my hand was almost neglected, and that I found it impossible to get back my work. You know that my landlady turned me out, and that almost perishing of hunger, and half-stripped of my clothes, I was brought down here by the Carrier—God bless him!”

"God bless him!" said Edward.

"But what you do *not* know, is the *way* in which my landlady turned me out—O, Edward, Edward! Hear me patiently, if you love me!

"One evening when I had not tasted food all day, or during part of the day before, and was lying on the mattress, in a stupor which had succeeded a fit of crying, my landlady walked into the room; and, after some commonplace and, as I well knew, heartless salutation, stood looking out of the window into the street, and practising a short cough, which had, I fancied, a degree of hesitation in it; such hesitation as a coarse mind in which all moral distinctions untouched by the deepening finger of the law were nearly obliterated might be capable of. I had no candle and no fire, and the light which came into my room from the gas-lit street suggested not only the cold outside, but the unsympathizing, unknowing crowd, not one of whom would look up to my window, and think what sorrow was within! Chilled, wretched, half unconscious as I was, there stole over me a hazy sense of something extremely ludicrous in the manner in which my landlady rehearsed her nervous '*Hem—hem—hem!*' with one arm akimbo, and the other

hand tapping on the pane ; and after some seconds, I believe I gave a short, hysterical laugh.

“ ‘ Glad to see you so cheerful to-night, Miss,’ said my landlady, and at the same moment I heard a burst of mirth from the street below us, in which the sound of a woman’s laughter was loudest ; but, O, Edward ! it was hollow, hollow laughter, and I shrank into myself with a shudder, which was mistaken for suppressed tittering, and produced a second congratulation upon my supposed cheerfulness, followed by praises of my eyes, and my hair, and my figure ; all rather timidly addressed to the chimney-pots of the houses opposite—the speaker’s back being turned towards me. ‘ To be sure, Miss, you are rather pale,’ she continued—Edward, you hurt me squeezing my arm like that ; no—no, don’t speak yet, that’s a *dear* boy ! I groaned or shrieked out some execration, and as my room-door was slammed to, I sank back and was instantly lost in a horrible dream, in which I seemed staggering, with dishevelled hair, haggard eyes, and bleeding feet, over precipitous rocks, while beneath them I heard the roaring of a furious sea,—a dull, heavy roaring which, in my dis-tempered thought, summoned me to a slippery crag,

from which I should inevitably topple down into the foaming water,—summoned me as with the voice of a fate, a voice I could not gainsay. Then came scenes of my childhood,—the chimney-corner, where I had spelt out my first little lessons by the fire-light in the dusk; the pew at church, where I had sat on my father's knee, with his hand on the curls in my neck; the bed-side where my mother had taught me to kneel, and say, 'Our Father which art in heaven.' Again, the black rocks, and the hoarse summons from the abyss,—and then the voice of my mother dictating the prayer of my childhood—'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' At the last soft syllable, I awoke to find I had swooned, and was lying, splashed with water, all alone. There was a loud disturbance in the street; the wind had got up, and was roaring in the chimney; and I heard the voice of a distant ballad-singer fitfully moaning a carol.

"The next day my landlady gave me a meal or two, and apologised for her rudeness in very humble terms. In the evening she asked me down-stairs to take a cup of tea with 'a friend' of hers, of whom I remember little beyond the fact that she was of

my own sex—so oppressed, bewildered, and incapable, was I. She did not pretend any great kindness; but merely said, in a quiet way, that she proposed taking me to a place after tea, where she thought there was work to be had. My landlady produced a cordial of some kind, of which, not to be uncivil, I partook. A short time after I had got out into the air, I began to feel giddy, the lights in the streets danced before my eyes, I walked on like one in a dream. I have a vague recollection that the multitudinous hum of the streets we passed on our way westward began to assume in my ears the tone of the clamouring sea of my dream, and that I found my right arm suddenly locked in that of a tall, dark figure that had joined us I knew not when or where. I remember a ring on the little finger of a long harpy hand, eyes of hateful intentness, a Satanic whisper, and a sudden pressure of my arm which had all the fire of the hopeless realm in its warmth. Then—have patience, dearest Edward!—then, with a despairing look at the closed houses, high and black, showing here and there a light in an upper window, and with some curse, wrung from me in the bitterness of my soul, I fled—fled madly, leaving my shawl in the man's hands.



“Through the cold winter night, with the snow in the sky waiting to fall, I went on, unthinking, uncaring, unknowing, feeling no chill, though my covering was gone. As providence would have it, I struck into the road to E——, and walked on till near midnight. At that late hour, I saw a light burning in a miserable roadside house in a district which was neither town nor country, and knocked at the door, which was opened by a thin, fallow, blear-eyed woman, who only looked a shade less miserable than myself. In my wretchedness, my despair, my utter abandonment, I hesitated not a moment; I minced no word; I felt no shame—

“ ‘A morsel of bread, a cup of water, and shelter, for Christ’s sake!’ I cried, being startled as I spoke, at the hoarseness of my own voice.

“ ‘Couldn’t do it mum,’ said the woman. ‘My old man’s sure to be home drunk about three in the mornin’, and its as much as my life’s worth to let him ketch a woman here, and I don’t think *you’d* be good for much if he ketched you when he was in one of his reglar fits, mum.’

But this creature was not proof against the bribe of the ribbons on my bonnet, and I had a crust and a drop of very sour elder wine with her, after which she

huddled me up in a corner, put the table near me, and so left me to sleep. At daybreak she woke me, not without difficulty, and, giving me a slice or two of bread, dismissed me. Throughout that day I suffered little from hunger, but was tormented by an insatiable thirst, and begged for drink at house after house. Almost everywhere I was looked upon with distrust; sometimes I was rudely repulsed; people looked at me and after me with wondering eyes. But I suffered little *beyond* thirst. The world around me was blank; my heart was all hate and scorn. I had but one thought—that I would walk straight on till I dropped dead, taking no *favours* from my fellow-creatures,—no, not a drop of water,—as I went. And I did not. Wherever I quenched my parching thirst, I left something, if I flung it in at the door, and saw it flung out again, as if it were pestiferous. So, my bonnet went, my gown, my shoes, my stockings—and, all in the snow of that bitter Christmas Eve——”

“O Helen! For pity’s sake, no more! It is over and gone! Let us cease to speak of it! No more, dearest Helen!”

“There is no more to tell, dear Edward, except that after I woke up in Huxford’s waggon, even after his kindness, an evil spirit took possession of me again,

and I rushed away, and sat upon a grave in the churchyard, silently invoking death."

"And now, Helen," said Edward, "you are happy and loved, and loving, and mine! But how the wind is getting up; see how the May-blossoms are blown about us."

"It reminds me of the snow-storm, last Christmas Eve," said Helen. "But I wonder how poor Marie is."

When Edward and Helen arrived at a point where the lane turned suddenly, they saw a man of slender figure leaning listlessly against a tree. In the sweet clear moonlight, Edward recognised a dreamy face with which he had latterly grown familiar.

"Somewhere in my path," said he, in a whisper to Helen, "I am almost sure to meet that artist! See how strangely he is looking at nothing—what a thoughtful thoughtlessness there is in his countenance!"

"A kind of vague intentness," replied Helen; "it looks very well, as he stands there in the moonlight, with his arms folded, and nobody near, but there is something hopeless and uncomfortable about it, when seen by daylight, and in society."

"I think there is genius in his eye and general expression," observed Edward; "but I cannot make

out—nobody can make out—what he is staying maundering about here for. I almost feel superstitious, when I look at him !”

At the sound of footsteps, the artist turned quickly round, with an abrupt but kindly good evening to Edward and Helen.

“How the wind has got up ! How it scatters the hawthorn blossoms !” said he.

“That is just what we were remarking, and Miss Ward was comparing the shower of white leaves to—to——”

Edward checked himself, and the artist smiled a very, very subdued smile indeed, saying—

“To the virgin-white hopes and vows of youth, scattered by the winds of circumstance, perhaps. But it does not take a *wind* to scatter mine ; a very faint breathing from any quarter of the compass is enough, and I was wondering, when you were approaching, what I am good for. But I fancy in my idlest hours I live an inner life which is not to be despised ; at all events, I am happy in it. If I had walked out to-night expressly to study the May evening landscape, preparatorily to painting it, I should not have found in it all that I have found, after strolling through these lanes for a couple of

hours, without any purpose whatever. I have now seen into the very soul of the scenery. The landscape has spoken to me and told me everything, and some day, perhaps, I shall put the landscape into a picture, which shall speak to the spectator, and tell him part of what the original told me. Perhaps the picture will be hung up in a merchant-prince's dining-room, and some man of the world shall feel a transient, but not quite resultless, flush of spiritual youth pass over him, as he lifts his eye from his fish or his soup, and cries, ' Bless me, Moneybags, what a sweet bit of nature that is ! You fancy yourself in the country as you look at it ! ' ”

“ If you're such an idle man, you know, I shall get you to take my portrait and Miss Ward's, if you will be good enough.”

“ I rather think, Mr. Hope, I can show you your's, at least a pencil sketch of you, that you will recognize at once to be not unlike.”

“ Indeed ! ”

“ Yes ; what do you say to this ? ” And the artist drew from his pocket a small sketch-book, and showed Edward a rough, but wonderfully characteristic drawing of a sad-faced, ragged wanderer, leaning on his staff, and looking downwards, with the hesitating

expression of a wearied man who could not determine whether he should go farther or stay and rest.

"Helen!" cried Edward, after a moment's speechless surprise, "look at this! do you recognise it? Is it like?"

"It is both like and unlike."

"Ah, the sad, fatigued look?"

"No, Edward, there is something else; and yet, when I look at you again, I do not know—it is mysterious altogether!"—with an enquiring look at the artist.

"There is no mystery," said he, replying to that questioning glance, "about the sketch. I saw Mr. Hope in France, as he must now know, and jotted him down, as I have done others, whose faces have attracted my attention. You see I am not quite unprepared to take his likeness, though of course I had no idea of ever meeting him again in my life. Ah! the wind is rising more and more; how it moans! It wails like a child who has lost his way in a wilderness!"

"Like what!" said Edward, with a slight start, and a look of greater surprise than ever. "*I* was once a child who had lost his way, and in a wilderness; but the wilderness was London."

"Indeed ! I thought there was adventure—romance, in your face, when I saw it first."

"I wish I could make it speak of thankfulness," replied Edward. "Between the misery of a beggar-boy, abandoned by wretched parents, to the happiness of to-day, is a wide, wide gulf, which the hand of God's goodness has spanned for me, and I sometimes feel as if my very countenance ought to be a psalm of thanksgiving gladness."

## VII.

### THE OLD SWORD-HANDLE.

It is Christmas night, a year after my story opened. There has been a wedding. A wedding, I mean, at the village church ; there is always a wedding somewhere. And a letter which has reached our friend Edward this morning informs him that there has been a wedding at a church over the sea, a church within sight of a well-remembered poplar-tree by the road-side. Marie has married a youth of the village who had long been wooing her, and who has now met his reward.

There is a quiet Christmas party at a nice house on the skirts of E——, at which the Clergyman and the Doctor are present. Widow Clinton is superintending Mr. Edward Hope's household, and her declining days will probably be as happy as material comfort, and the reverent friendship of those about her, can make it.

"Let us drink happiness to Marie," said Edward.  
"It was from her that I learned how women can



love. It was she who sent me back to dear old England with doubts and yearnings which have led me to the bliss of this moment."

"Happiness to Marie and Marie's!" went round the room.

"And now," said the Doctor, "had you not better let us have the treat of the evening, Mr. Hope? Is it not time to uncover these portraits, of which we have heard such praises?"

"Well, we will look at them," replied Edward, "and I think you will all agree with me that this young artist cannot long remain unknown. First, we will look at Mrs. Hope's. My love, is this like you, do you think?"

"I think it flatters me, Edward—don't you think so, Mr. Gray?"

"I'm sure Mr. Gray must see that no pencil *can* flatter you, you puss. The only thing that puzzles me is that I, whose earliest recollections are of being taken about the streets begging, and who was knocked about and beaten, and at last deserted by my parents, should find myself the husband of this dear, sweet girl, whose portrait is here. Or, if there is one thing besides that I cannot make out, it is a sort of dreamy half-recollection—but no, I cannot even call

it a half-recollection—it must be fancy.” Mr. Hope closed his eyes for a moment, and pressed his forehead with his hand.

“The portrait, my dear Sir!” said the Clergyman.

“The portrait, by all means!” cried the Doctor.

“O, aye—the portrait—here it is—is it not flattering?”

The Widow started, and grasped the Clergyman’s hand, who seemed to understand the expression of her face—

“Is it not like my husband?”

“It is, indeed,” said Mr. Gray, with some abstraction of manner.

“I never noticed the resemblance when looking at Mr. Hope,” resumed the Widow, “but now, it glares at me! Stand so—like this portrait—Mr. Hope—Merciful heaven, it is my husband over again!”

There was a strange, hushed pause, during which every one looked bewilderedly from the portrait to Mr. Hope.

“Tell me,” said the Widow, convulsively grasping his arm, while Helen hung, with an undefinable thrill of emotion, upon his shoulder,—“Tell me!—what you were going to say you recollected . . . . quick! . . . . tell me all . . . .!”

"I was going to say—open the door, please, Mrs. Clinton seems faint—that I have sometimes found as it were at the very bottom of my consciousness, a sort of dream that my parents were not *always* beggars—and there is a sword-handle —"

"Heaven support me!" cried Mrs. Clinton, and swooned on the sofa.

As soon as she had recovered, she looked fixedly for a moment at Mr. Hope, and then turned to a female servant who was holding a tumbler of water—

"Bring down the small box on the table at my bedside, Mary."

When the box came down, the Widow unlocked it with trembling fingers, and exposed a child's broken toy-cart, a pair of shoes, a little cap, and a sword-handle, snapped from the blade.

"That was your plaything, Edward, my son, my beloved boy, my only one!"

And, in point of fact, the Widow had found her long-lost child, though the evidence of the portrait and the remembered sword-handle, would not have constituted a legal justification of an amendment of the marriage registry of Edward and Helen.

It so happened that Dobbs was the first to hear

the final solution of the mystery which had opened upon E—— a whole twelvemonth before. It also happened that as he walked along, brimful of the momentous tidings that Widow Clinton had found her boy who was stolen at three years old, and whose loss had broken his father's heart, the first person he encountered was Waters, the Barber. Briming over with delighted importance, he must needs tell even Waters, though the feud between them had darkened and deepened during the past year. And in virtue of the blessed power of one of those "touches of nature" that "make the whole world kin," the wounds of Waters and the wounds of Dobbs respectively were healed, and a reconciliation took place over a cheerful glass shared by the Radical chief and the Tory chief at the Pied Bull. To complete the good work, and give the intelligence the best possible chance of a rapid circulation all over the place, they renewed the oath of friendship over a second glass, even more cheerful than the first, at the bar of the "Rainbow and Rat-trap." So that the disputes of the two antipodean factions in the village ended in a coalition after all !

The young artist who had painted the portraits of Edward and Helen soon found himself with more

than enough work upon his hands. It was asserted by intelligent members of the community that Edward's likeness was a real flash of genius; a genuine art-revelation, making manifest as it did a resemblance to the dead which had escaped in the living man, the very eyes which affection had most quickened, and remembrance best informed. That resemblance, however, was not a thing of feature, and its discovery was the result of a fine intuition transferred to the canvass. If that painter had painted Hamlet's father's portrait from memory, Hamlet's exclamation would not have been,

"My father in his habit as he lived!"

but, "My father in his essence as he lives!" The pencil had seized and given to the spectator that indestructible individuality of THE MAN which would outlive the fusing of the pyramids if the pyramids were diamonds.

Just when the painter found himself bewildered by conflicting applications for likenesses expressly ordered "to be done as well as Mr. Edward's," he learned that his cup was yet destined to receive that last drop which should make it overflow. One day when the Clergyman was sitting to him, he received a visit from

the identical Bob Chuckers who swept away the snow from Widow Clinton's door on Christmas Eve twelve-month. What is more, Bob Chuckers was not alone. He was accompanied by the tall girl who had assisted in the Widow's shop and household. His attire was scrupulously arranged; his hair was studiously brushed; his manner was almost superfluously sedate. Sally, too, had obviously been up at early dawn, and had made herself as striking, not to say startling, an object of the feminine gender as a shilling brooch of the size of a saucer, and garments whose hues had been selected from the most approved discords in colour, could very well aid in producing. Thus it was plain that Sally had not gone through a course of æsthetics, and also that her nose had been furiously reddened by a prolonged stay in a cold bedroom before a looking-glass. Bob Chuckers had exhibited his Christmas-piece round the place on Boxing Monday, and indeed all through Boxing week, with what Rosalind called "most petitionary vehemence," and being in possession of coppers amounting in all to three shillings and five-pence halfpenny, had transmuted them into silver, as far as that was possible, and now waited on the artist, or rather assaulted him, for the purpose of getting his portrait and Sally's taken off-

hand. And the artist was good-natured enough to gratify them, though not in the impromptu fashion they had calculated upon. He even retouched both portraits, to satisfy some scruples expressed by the sitters, and made them quite happy in that sort of startling resemblance which is discerned in an exaggerated shirt-collar, or a magnified brooch.

I am not able to add that the painter's career was a brilliant one : he made money for a time, and married a strange hoyden of a woman, then went up to London, and was never heard of afterwards. His name was Desard.

The only individual in the neighbourhood who was not carried away by the general enthusiasm of satisfaction at the restoration of Widow Clinton's son was old Coldcockle. He shut himself up, and behaved in a sulkier way than ever, to the great disgust of all the inhabitants, even including the tradespeople with whom he dealt. It was universally remarked that such a sullen old savage never could have had any but a grim, selfish sort of love for a woman, and that it was only mortified pride which had turned him into a sour recluse. Some young men, of whom I was one, laid their heads together, and concocted a scheme to disgust him with E——, and make him

quit the place. The artist had said, one day, at the bar of the "Pied Bull," when Waters and all the chief talkers of his clique were present, that he was painting a picture of the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, and wanted a head for the leading assassin, who was to be represented in the act of daggering a sweet sparkling-eyed babe of eighteen months, that was stretching out its little hands and cooing at him—did anybody think that old curmudgeon would give him half-a-dozen sittings at a shilling a-piece? He *must* have half-a-dozen of 'em, he said, for the quantity of vinegar in Coldcockle's visage was not to be extracted in fewer opportunities. So, what did we do, but go in a body—seven or eight of us—one day, to old Coldcockle's house, and send in a card stating that a deputation of the inhabitants were waiting to present a humble address to him, with reference to recent discreditable manifestations in the village,—these "manifestations" having been displays of feeling on the part of little boys, who had the usual juvenile knack of telling the naked truth. After some hesitation, the fellow received us, when I read out, with a good deal of bowing and scraping, the address which had been prepared for the occasion, and which stated that we were prepared to subscribe for



the purpose of having some memorial of a gentleman who, we thought, would not long be with us; and that we solicited the favour of his sitting for his port——. I did not get any further with my speech, for he aimed a book at my head, which missed its mark; and catching it in my hands, I said we were much obliged to him, and would retain the precious volume as a memento of his residence at E——. This I rapped out hurriedly, as we were all backing away, leaving our gentleman transfixed with rage. I have since been sorry for my share in this feat, though it was successful in ridding us of an obnoxious personage. There was one person in the world, who, to our certain knowledge, was attached to old Coldcockle, and to whom we always supposed he must be attached,—and that was his housekeeper; a harridan nearly as sour as he was, and nearly as much disliked. They disappeared together, in about a month, for good and all. We found the book thrown at my head was a set of interest-tables, which we guessed had been given him just on leaving school, when he was going out into the world, perhaps into a counting-house—for the fly-leaf bore, in a gorgeously flourished hand, the inscription; “B. Coldcockle, given him by his uncle on his fourteenth birth-day.”

Poor old Coldcockle ! I wonder what sort of *boy* he was ?

Jenkins, who laid down the first crown-piece for the Wanderer, proposed afterwards that the original subscribers should again club together and buy a teapot for Huxford's wife, "to express," said he, "their sense of her husband's judicious and benevolent conduct upon a trying and difficult occasion." The suggestion was carried out, but the teapot was never used, being kept by the proud and particular old lady on the middle shelf of the triangular cupboard in the corner of their living-room, full in view, under the glass, of all comers. I do not believe it ever knew the scent of tea-leaf, or the scentlessness of hot water.

Edward and Helen have been seen to smile a serious thoughtful smile, when passing Mr. Bickerton's grave. But once, when their little girl seated herself upon it in play, her mother removed her, with, it was considered, a degree of nervous haste and trepidation which could only be accounted for upon the supposition that the child had begun to manifest some of that susceptibility to desperate and mistaken impulses which had characterised its parents, and that

the mother was superstitious enough to fancy that there was an ill-omen in the girl's choosing the tomb-stone for a seat. If any such omen there was, I am not aware that it has been justified up to this moment. The younger Helen has always been surrounded by favourable circumstances, and is a blooming, cheerful English girl, whose sweet smile is enough to dissipate the very



## FROST UPON THE PANE.

## THE EPILOGUE.

WHEN I had finished my story, during which I was flattered by observing an interest and animation on the countenance of Charles' elder sister which I had never before noticed, I rose and went to the window, and drawing aside the curtains, said,

"What a beautiful moonlight night!"

"Is there any frost upon the pane?" enquired Charles' eldest sister, stepping forward to join me. But was it likely that there should be any frost upon the pane, considering the fire we had kept up?

While we were nestling in the window curtains we heard gay, dear little Rosy, speaking the epilogue of my story.

"Let us see," she began, "what have we got to dispose of? First, there is the Widow's Cap. Well, of course, Widow Clinton will have given that up, now that she has in a manner got the dead back again in the restoration of the lost living! There is an end of the Widow's Cap. Then, we had the

Waggon and Horses. Ah! what has got Old Huxford, uncle? I suppose he was provided for by Mr. Hope, otherwise Clinton?"

"Not at all, my dear," said I, peeping through the curtains—"Old Huxford is a real character, and I am able to say positively that he refused to retire from 'the carrying line,' and drove the old waggon between London and E—— as long as he could hold the whip or see before him. He was forced to retire, before the railways began to tell much upon his occupation; and he and his family needed little help, for he had been a thrifty man. What kindness could gracefully do for them—whatever, indeed, they would accept—was done."

"Thank you, uncle. Well, there's an end of the waggon and horses. The Wanderer is, we know, married and settled. The Poplar-tree—I suppose the poplar-tree will be in leaf again when the spring comes, and Marie will not be able to help thinking of England when she passes it. Then about the May-blossoms—O, I remember, uncle told us the wind dispersed them! The Old Sword-handle,—I dare say that has been the plaything of a little Edward, and is still in existence, not much damaged. O, I forget the Easy Chair and the Church-porch—

I could not for the life of me tell whether the thing *was* an easy chair or a church-porch, when I looked at the window that morning, so I put down both. Well, here is the easy chair; and, uncle, when you're tired of standing there, perhaps you will come and take your place again!"

We returned to our places by the fireside.

"I think, Rosy," said I, "you observed that there was an end of the widow's cap? It is a fact that, as you surmised, Mrs. Clinton gave up wearing it after that Christmas night; but there is an end of the cap in more senses than one. The old lady died twelve years ago."

"Rest her soul!" said Rosy.

"Amen!" responded Charles. "And let us gather the roses while we may."

"Music!" cried Rosy, clapping her hands.

"Mistletoe!" cried Charles, whirling her into the centre of the room.

I think I have omitted to say that his eldest sister was attended by *no* gentleman—there was a mistake about that:—and it fell to my lot to kiss her under the mistletoe. With respect to the equivocation of the Frost on the Pane concerning the Easy Chair and Church-porch, I have only to observe that though I

have not relinquished my chair, there is now another placed opposite me, which has an occupant who not long ago entered the church-porch—not the church-porch at E——, but another quite as dear to me—only to pass through it again as my wife. In moments of placid happiness, such as now fall frequently to my share, my partner sometimes says—

“Surely, the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Effort is noble, and there is a rewarding God for the Worker. But did not that young painter, without an ambition or an aim, unseal a truer fount of happiness than thousands have ever opened whose lives have been all struggle and persistence?”

“It sometimes makes one tremble,” I reply, “to think upon what small things the fabric of one’s earthly bliss may be erected! How the detaching of one frail thread shall seem to unravel the whole texture of individual felicity! If it had not been for that sweet little creature’s suggestion of a tale about the Frost upon the Pane, you and I, love——”

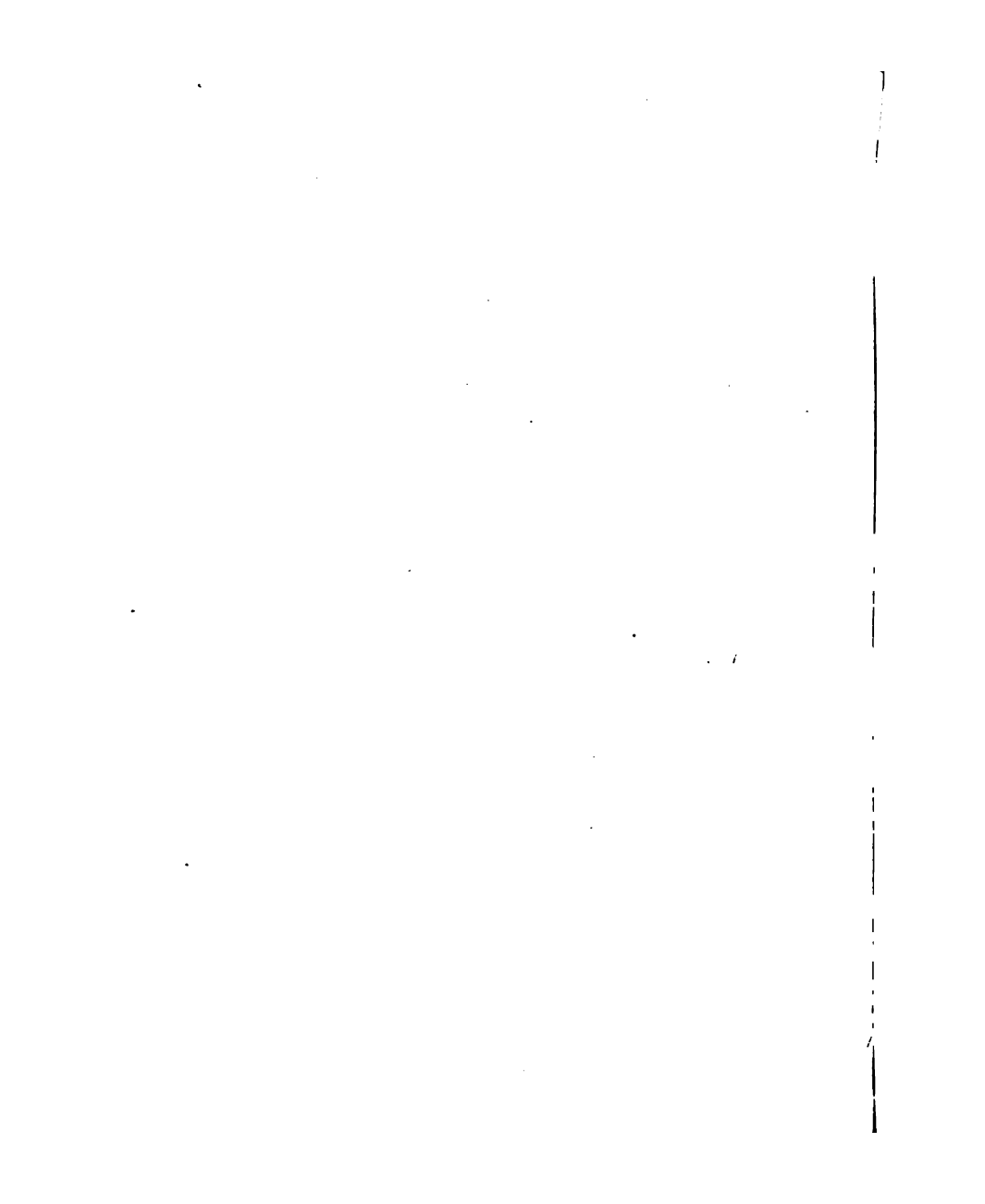
“We will not admit any retrospective hypotheses about it;” is generally the reply. “Hush, dear husband! as you love me!”

“Well, well,”—I respond, “no more, then!”——

But, to keep us humble, and mindful of a presiding Providence, amid the endless talk of "Work, work, work! be earnest, earnest, earnest!" which is almost degenerating into a cant, it may be well to call to mind sometimes that according to my good wife's quotation from THE BOOK, "the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong."

FINIS.





1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions and activities. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for transparency and accountability, particularly in financial matters. The text outlines various methods for organizing and storing data, including digital databases and physical filing systems. It also mentions the need for regular audits and reviews to ensure the integrity of the information.

2. The second section focuses on the role of communication in achieving organizational goals. It highlights the importance of clear and concise communication, both internally and externally. The text provides examples of effective communication strategies, such as regular meetings, newsletters, and open-door policies. It also discusses the challenges of communication, such as language barriers and cultural differences, and offers suggestions for overcoming these obstacles.

3. The third part of the document addresses the issue of resource management. It discusses the importance of identifying and allocating resources effectively to support the organization's mission. The text provides a framework for assessing resource needs and developing a plan to meet them. It also mentions the importance of monitoring and evaluating resource usage to ensure that resources are being used efficiently and effectively.

4. The final section discusses the importance of continuous improvement and innovation. It emphasizes that organizations must be willing to embrace change and seek out new ways to improve their performance. The text provides examples of successful innovation initiatives and offers suggestions for fostering a culture of innovation. It also mentions the importance of staying up-to-date on industry trends and developments to ensure that the organization remains competitive.

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